Consortial IT Services: Collaborating to Reduce the Pain

The Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium provides its members with a wealth of IT services while containing costs

By Ed Klonoski

Those of us in higher education who work in information technology live in interesting times. (Remember the ancient Chinese curse?) The rapidly increasing importance of IT services to higher education means our authority, budget, and staff are growing, too. At the same time we’re struggling with the problems familiar to our brethren in industry — staffing, maintaining current services, and rolling out new ones. Unlike the for-profit sector, we struggle to arrange “venture capital” to underwrite dramatic upgrades to our infrastructures. Since most of us work for nonprofits, we make arguments for new resources based on increases in efficiency and desperate need.

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Figure 1
Distance Learning Courses
Semester
Fall 1998 140
Fall 1999 157
Spring 1999 138
Fall 2000 148
Spring 2001 149

Figure 2
Distance Learning Enrollments
Semester
Fall 1998 200
Fall 1999 207
Spring 1999 221
Fall 2000 226
Spring 2001 237

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The Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium

In this article I’ll describe the IT services, infrastructure, budget, and successes of the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC). By doing so, I hope to provide a model for schools looking to expand their learning technologies while containing the costs of development and maintaining pedagogical effectiveness. I’ll detail our services, costs, growth rate, and future plans, then conclude with the advantages of using a consortial approach to IT development.

For three years, the CTDLC has provided its 36 member institutions with IT services including a Web site, marketing, course management software, course hosting, course development, faculty training, help desk support, online student assessment, a student financial aid database, and more. These services are supplied to two-year and four-year schools, both public and private. The $2.5 million dollar budget comes from the legislature, and the CTDLC earns additional revenue from fees and services.

In the 2000-2001 academic year Connecticut offered 13 online programs of 400 courses to more than 6,000 students. Figures 1 and 2 track the growth of distance education in Connecticut over the past three years.

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eration. As the Connecticut General Assembly viewed the CTDLC as a “utility,” to quote Mary Beth Susman, Director of Connecticut’s Virtual University. Resources would pour into the CTDLC, and services and grants would flow to Connecticut.”

Because most state agencies (and this includes educational institutions) have a budget that reflects the services they provide, it’s difficult to imagine how many of them could afford for the CTDLC to cobble together sufficient dollars to create new services. The CTDLC didn’t have a historically defined set of services, so, in a very real sense, this made the CTDLC an institution where the state could create investment capital.

The Advantages of Consortial IT

Clearly, the first advantage of consortial IT is collaborative begging. Since all schools must approach their legislatures for money, often for projects that seem redundant, asking for common dollars to support a common infrastructure makes sense. Here we argue for Connecticut General Assembly’s plan, the CTDLC today is building a collaboratively managed computing tool set. In addition, the CTDLC provides a robust and developing support infrastructure from different institutions. It also integrates with existing systems. (These were significant when the General Assembly wanted to build a solution that would work.)

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departments must supply. A consortial approach to IT can delegate small but widely felt problems — such as the need for an online database just described — to an organization with the resources and motivation to develop working solutions.

A fourth area of opportunity is part of the reason I am writing today. A consortial approach to systems development brings together the IT planning folks at multiple institutions and links them to what’s developing around the country. These conversations are driven by the experiments that the consortial entity conducts, which become part of the research and development process for the members. The consortial IT group becomes a skunk works for its members, working with new systems and approaches before they are battle-tested, and sharing the wisdom gained from that pain with the larger membership.

For example, the CTDLC has underwritten and built an online registration and e-commerce system for two of its members. The system is being tested as I write this, with future plans to extend it into the student information systems at each of these institutions. The CTDLC is already getting requests from other institutions to participate in this effort. Those member institutions with large student information systems (SCT Banner and PeopleSoft, for example) will probably have such interfaces built for them by vendors, but smaller schools will need support. Here again, consortial IT can level the playing field for schools throughout Connecticut.

Another example of how the CTDLC assists institutions with IT planning concerns integrating CMSs into student information systems (SISs). Currently, most of our members deploy CMS applications without much thought as to how they will connect to the SIS backend. The CTDLC provides two CMS applications — Blackboard and WebMentor — and plans to add WebCT in fiscal year 2002. The idea here is that the consortium provides application hosting, technical support, help desk support, faculty training, and eventually the application programming interface (API) to connect the SIS of an institution to its CMS of choice. The CTDLC is taking the initiative — and the risk — of building a pilot solution to demonstrate how this process can work. In the process the CTDLC is also collecting information about how others handle the task, what the choices involve, and what the price is (financial and administrative). We’re making purchases, we’re recruiting staff, and we’re using our hard-won wisdom. Our work increases our value as a partner while we’re growing our expertise, so the project is a win-win effort for both the members and the CTDLC.

The Challenges of Operating a Consortium

If you have read this far, you must either be working in a collaborative venture or considering participating in one. The challenges involve funding, personnel, and attitude. We solved the personnel issue much harder than how to connect the SIS to the CMS. The CTDLC has successfully lobbied the legislature for resources, and second, we’re recruiting about 50 percent of our costs through the fees we charge for services to our members and our corporate clients. (See Figure 1.) So our financial model combines legislative support and growing self-sufficiency.

The personnel issue is much harder to address. Any technology company requires motivated, professional IT workers, but in the current economy (even with the shakeout in the dotcom world) finding and keeping IT talent frustrates many of us. In fact, finding and keeping IT talent may be one of higher education’s most pressing problems. Further complicating our situation, the CTDLC is a state agency with a unionized staff. We hire people ready to move their skill set to the next level, then support them as they do that. As a result we have happy employees who are learning and growing, but probably paid less than if they returned to private enterprise. The risk comes not from hiring technical people with a proven track record in the technologies that we employ; instead, we offer our new hires the opportunity to grow their skills as they work. This winning strategy has resulted in almost zero turnover (we did lose one of our people to a member institution), so we’ll continue to hire using this developmental philosophy.

Finally, let me offer a word about attitude, which is critical to the success of any collaborative effort. One challenge to consortial IT is to respect the policies and politics of its members. For example, the CTDLC supports faculty employed by member institutions, helping them build courses and programs. The CTDLC does much of the faculty training and all of the technical support for those institutions that use our resources. This work brings us into the heart of our member institutions, where we can have a powerful effect on faculty morale and student satisfaction.

In order not to trip on this challenge, we have cultivated an organizational attitude best characterized as customer support. We take pride in offering our clients — faculty in this example — the best technical and pedagogical support we can provide while remaining absolutely clear that they are driving the process. This political sensitivity has made us popular and valued; the absence of it would destroy the effort before it could gain momentum. So the CTDLC staff trades stories about happy faculty and students the way any corporate help desk would, and we support each other as we face the challenges of supporting these groups.

Facing the Challenges

As the need for IT services in higher education continues to grow, the cost for these services also grows. Established IT departments struggle to address emerging issues created by distance education because these problems often require customized solutions, administrative changes, venture capital, and even mission changes. To add to the difficulty, the new economy challenges higher education to unbundle its services, and it is asked to play a role in the deployment of new services, the reorganization of a beloved delivery system, and the unbundleing of services never before outsourced.

Consortial IT offers a method for managing the expense, risks, and creative such challenges represent. State legislatures will see campuses banding together to manage the change process as a positive step, a sort of field trial of the collaborations driving the New Economy. The resulting consortial organization will have the resources and mission empowering it to create and disseminate solutions. Many of the “virtual universities” arising across the country provide additional examples of this approach, such as Kentucky Virtual, Michigan Virtual, and the Southern Regional Electronic Campus. While each has its own developmental history, all are working collaboratively to assist higher education in integrating technology innovations into the learning enterprise.

We can learn from their hard-earned lessons — and our own — to meet a variety of technology-centered challenges.

Endnotes

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