



E-volving from professor with chalk to computer jock University prepares to introduce software to replace ISIS, increases current tech-ed programs

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In today's digital age, University students come to the classroom with increasingly high expectations for technology use in lecture, according to Michael R. McPherson, associate vice president and deputy chief information officer. To help professors keep up with the most recent trends in academic technology, including the new software in development for class management and registration, Information Technology & Communication officials and graduate students are working together to ensure new technologies are integrated as smoothly as possible into University operations.

Losing the 'I' in ISIS

One ongoing technological overhaul underway at the University is the replacement of the Integrated Student Information System. According to Student Systems Project Director Susan Barr, the University is in the process of finalizing new software to replace ISIS as a tool for enrolling in classes. ITC is currently training faculty and student groups to use the new software, called the Student Information System, Barr said.

"The technology that supports ISIS is outdated," she said, adding that the new program "will position the University with technology that is necessary for change and growth in future."

One difference between ISIS and SIS involves the way in which students will register for classes. The new system, Barr said, will allow advisers to lift the hold on course registration themselves through their own specific login portal. Carole Horwitz, communication manager of the student systems project, said students should not worry about this increased dependence on academic advisers.

"We are going to print a guide and distribute it to all faculty," she said, which is informally referred to as a "desktop cheat sheet."

Barr explained that ITC has organized a group, called Faculty Advisers to the Student System, which will decide the best way to teach the faculty of each department how to use the new SIS technology.

"We're trying to [make the switch] in a way that will make sense for [faculty]," Horwitz said, explaining that ITC is prepared to train specific staff members with a particular interest in computer technology to help other faculty members in adapting to SIS.

Computer Jocks

Assistance from ITC and others could help individual University faculty members and departments determine how best to incorporate various new technologies into their work, as professors have varying levels of demand for new technologies.

"Professors are supposed to be leaders in their disciplines," said Robert Ribando, mechanical and aerospace engineering associate professor. "That doesn't necessarily translate to being computer jocks."

Ribando said he does not own a cell phone and probably could not program a VCR but noted that he does have significantly more expertise in his own research projects and in the classes he teaches.

"There is such a thing as a technological overload," Ribando said. "I devote my technical expertise to my job."

McPherson said while the University tries to make technology and technology

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education available to all faculty and staff, it does not tell professors what should and should not be incorporated into each class.

Ribando said technology does not have to be a part of the classroom.

“If I wanted to, I could use a standard textbook and ignore the existence of computers,”

Ribando said. “Someone else teaching the same course could not use technology at all.”

Ribando noted, however, that the opportunity to use technology can be quite valuable to demonstrate complex ideas and concepts more effectively, a luxury professors did not have in the past.

Ahead of the curve

Because various technologies are considered useful by many professors, McPherson noted that the University is making great strides in its efforts to increase the availability and accessibility of technology — which “is no longer an exotic add-on” — to professors. McPherson said, in the past, most classrooms did not even have an overhead projector to display materials. If a professor needed one, he would have to put in a request; moreover, he might receive different models of projectors with different methods of operation every day.

Now, however, the University has projectors in most classrooms, McPherson said. The new projectors have become commonly used by many professors, he noted, because “you have a higher level of confidence that things are going to work.”

Ribando added that ITC has several groups on Grounds, including organizations such as Teaching + Technology Support Partners, that foster technological education within the University faculty. John Alexander, manager of instructional technology with ITC, said graduate students serve as support partners for their respective departments through Teaching + Technology Support Partners.

Instead of taking on duties as a teaching assistant, Alexander said, a graduate student can help faculty members learn how to operate technology that could be helpful in their work. These TTSP workers are helping professors make the switch from Toolkit to UVaCollab.

Alexander said he thinks it is especially valuable to have a graduate student serve as a liaison between the department and ITC because the student understands the material and how it should be taught; the student thus can choose what information is best to share with his department’s faculty members.

The program, though, is relatively small, Alexander said, noting the program can fund about 12 departments at a time. Despite budget cuts, the University plans to continue this program into the future.

“The faculty endorsed this program multiple times,” he said, adding that faculty often ask for the program to be expanded. The Nursing School was an early advocate of TTSP, Alexander said, and found the position to be so useful that the school made it a full-time position.

The University is a sort of pioneer in this respect, Alexander said.

“When I talk to people at other universities they think this is a great program,” he said, noting that colleagues at Harvard University have shown interest in starting a similar program. University faculty members who have moved on to other schools, Alexander said, have established similar programs in their new environment.

McPherson said the next part of the University’s plan to increase the use of technology is simply to “raise awareness” of what can be accomplished. McPherson cited the New Horizons Conference, an event in which students, faculty and staff can come together and discuss their own technology-related projects.

“The idea is to get people working with tech either in teaching or research to come together,” he said, adding that ITC hopes the program will provide faculty members with ideas of ways to incorporate technology in the classroom and offer help with ongoing projects.

The bottom line

McPherson said slightly less than 4 percent of the University’s annual \$1.1 billion budget, about \$4.4 million, is allocated to technology infrastructure and technology education. He said he hopes to continue to use these funds to make the University known for its technological capabilities. At this point, though, McPherson said he is pleased with the University’s current relationship with technology.

“Generally speaking, we are doing quite well,” he said, noting his particular pride in the wireless capabilities across Grounds.

Still, McPherson realizes that the University must continue to work to keep up with the demands of constantly evolving new technology.

“It’s a question of constantly reevaluating what we are doing,” he said. “It’s an ongoing process.”



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