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BRIDGING THE COLLEGIATE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In fall 1997, the majority of computers at Midlands Technical College (MTC) were limited by the college's infrastructure to a text-based access mode for the Internet. This interface was so limited and awkward that many employees chose not to be connected at all. Email was not a reliable method of communication within the college because accessing email was difficult and attachments were impossible—many employees refused to use email. However, one department—Information Systems Technology (IST)—had an infrastructure that supported a graphical interface and some computers configured with Netscape for web browsing. Most of the departments at MTC used computers with little memory and ran MS-DOS 6.0 and WordPerfect 5.0—remember Shift F5 to print or was that to save? But a few departments were using the latest in Microsoft products and had computers with plenty of speed and memory. MTC was host to a COLLEGIATE DIGITAL DIVIDE—the information technology have's and have not's.

MTC was a technical college operating with obsolete technology, an unacceptable situation if the college was to continue to provide excellent educational opportunities at economical prices and to prepare students for a highly technological workplace. The college developed a detailed technology plan, and aspects of this plan were infused into grant applications. In early 1998, MTC received the AACC/Microsoft Working Connections grant. Only a few weeks later the college received a Title III grant. At the same time, the college allocated several million dollars (both from operational funds and donations) for an information infrastructure upgrade (including desktop machines) on all campuses. These efforts and associated activities allowed Midlands Technical College to bridge the "collegiate digital divide."

The director of Teaching and Learning and project leader for Title III, and the department chair of Information Systems Technology (IST) and project leader for Working Connections, set about to combine efforts and maximize the effect of the grants on faculty training and technology integration. The Working Connections and Title III grants used individualized assessment tools for determining the level of expertise for each faculty member and then allowed each to design an individualized training plan for professional development. The tool for the IST department was different from other departments, preventing faculty members from feeling like "everybody needs to be a networking guru or programming whiz." Both tools centered on technology and skills that faculty members would need to communicate with other faculty, to conduct research online, and to begin the journey of integrating technology into the curriculum.

The Title III grant provided funds for faculty training, curriculum development, and equipment for multimedia classrooms. Faculty members from every department were given access to resources needed to learn and apply new skills; now curriculum development integrating information technology is being conducted in all departments, fostering an environment invigorated by new questions and new discussions. Now the focus is on the "how to's" of delivering more exciting learning experiences to students, as opposed to the discussions of two years ago which focused on departmental inequities—e.g., "Why does he have Internet access on his desktop and I don't?"

It is not only the access and equipment quality issue that has changed, but the ease and familiarity with which faculty members interact with technology. This ease and familiarity would not have occurred without the intensive training that was made possible by the two grants and the incorporation of multimedia equipment into classrooms which allowed application of new instructional strategies.

The Working Connections grant provided funding for intensive faculty training and curriculum development in the IST department; the resulting curriculum changes have been significant and are encouraging changes in other departments. For example, office application software competencies for students in all departments are considered the norm, rather than advanced or

special. Various departments are asking for newly designed courses in information literacy and for ways to integrate components of information technology into developmental courses. This sharing between the IST department and other departments is another sign of bridging the collegiate digital divide.

The key elements in bridging the collegiate digital divide are funding, planning, training, creating an infrastructure, and applying what is learned. If any one of these elements had been missing, we would still be working in a collegiate digital divide environment.

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