

To: Dr. Douglas McMillan, Vice President for Academic Affairs

From: Dr. Christopher Moretti, Chair of the Faculty Senate

Date: April 15th, 2014

Re: The need for permanent postings for the Center for Instructional Development & Technology (CIDT)

Vice President McMillan,

At the April 9th meeting of the Faculty Senate some faculty brought us their concerns about the current state of CIDT operations, particularly with regards to Blackboard. Although no one doubts that both Dr. Adair and Christala Smith are working very hard (and Ellen Hendrix's efforts before them are legendary), the variety, severity, and number of technical issues have already passed beyond what two part-time staff (however dedicated) can reasonably handle in a timely manner. The sense of urgency was such that rather than go through the usual cycle of 1-2 Senate meetings to craft and approve a formal resolution the Senate moved to have me write this letter on their behalf to more quickly convey their concerns.

Our understanding is that this semester alone there have been at least 27 cases that have been submitted to Blackboard support covering a wide range of issues such as update failures, announcements failing to go out to students, inaccessibility of video and images, and Safe Assign grading errors. Generally each case gets resolved via a three step process:

- 1) The instructional designer posts a case to Blackboard support.
- 2) The instructional designer receives a response from Blackboard, but must forward it on to Network Operations as it involves system operations.
- 3) Network Operations implements the solutions as best they can given their already demanding workload (often on overtime).

In general each case can take several days to a week before it is resolved, primarily due to the technical necessity to go through Network Operations and add to their already full schedules. In the meantime the various failures directly impact student learning and their perceptions of both our distance learning efforts and the University as a whole. The number of issues will only increase in the future, especially as in the coming semesters Blackboard fees will be rolled into fees on all courses rather than being a distinct fee just on Blackboard-designated courses (which will remove the current disincentive for faculty to use Blackboard if they would only do so marginally).

It is the Senate's understanding that in both 2012 and 2013 there have been reorganization requests on behalf of CIDT. While we cannot speak on the necessity of title changes and physical structure improvements, the need to have job postings made available for permanent positions is fairly clear given the levels of credit hour production (about 10,700 hours in Spring 2013) and the increasing frequency and severity of issues. A quick survey of our sister institutions shows that it is not uncommon to have 5 staff in place where we have a position for 1

(as in the case at Northeastern and Southwestern) or to have 1 staff position with support completely outsourced (as is the case at Northwestern). The current proposal of three positions (CIDT Director, CIDT Instructional Designer, and CIDT Technician) seems like a conservative step to solve the current problems. Having a Technician position with a reasonable computer science background seems particularly important, both in terms of shortening the resolution time for problems and in compensating for the additional work currently being offloaded to Network Operations.

We understand that arranging for permanent position postings is a nontrivial undertaking and adding positions can be a difficult sell given our budget situation. However given the accelerating and urgent nature of the problems it seems clear this should be a high priority - in a world where students have a wide array of choices for their online learning we can't afford to get a reputation for "online courses that are good those days when they work". If we pursue online learning we owe it to both the students and the faculty to have a platform with sufficient support, and our current experience shows that we need more than one dedicated position for that to be the case.

For your convenience I've included the documents I have been given regarding the earlier proposed reorganizations and the new positions. I appreciate the time it will take to consider this important issue. If I or the Senate can be of any help on this issue please let me know.

Respectfully,

Chris Moretti
Chair, Faculty Senate

Attached documents:
CIDT Reorganization Request 2012
CIDT Reorganization Request 2013
CIDT Director Job Description
CIDT Instructional Designer Job Description
CIDT Technician Job Description