

# Turbo-Charge Your Tech Services

by James Chaffee

**A**s the information technology age speeds up, it's vital that business faculty keep themselves and their students up-to-date. But how can professors know which technological tools are right for their subject matter and style of teaching, and which ones will fall flat? The role of a robust IT services office is to help them determine just that, providing broad-based, cross-curriculum technological leadership and support to a school's students, faculty, and staff.

In the Stead Technology Services Group at the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business in Iowa City, we believe that there should be few limits to what a technology services office can do to assist faculty. It should do more than set up video conferences and tackle IT troubles. It should also foster faculty's excitement about and willingness to experiment with technology; it should help them solve problems in the classroom, with or without technology. Its function is to encourage and support professors' attempts to enhance their teaching.

*An active office of technology services can help a business school spark the imaginations of its faculty and build innovation into its culture.*



### **Create a Culture of 'IT Innovators'**

Many business faculty attend conferences about new educational technologies and return to campus excited and energized by what they've learned. They've seen the latest in state-of-the-art interactive tablets, student response systems, trading rooms, Web tools, and software that could help them expand and enhance the learning environment.

But when they get back to campus, these would-be innovators can be frustrated to find that they have no resources available to help them examine these devices and implement them in ways that make sense. Once enthusiastic about the potential of new technology, these faculty can become uninterested because of a lack of support.

For example, before one school's tech office began its outreach efforts in earnest, even its most enthusiastic faculty struggled. One of its computer science professors attended a conference that presented robots designed to help students learn programming concepts. Excited, he purchased a small robot and brought it into the classroom. Unfortunately, he failed to integrate it into the course in a way that sparked students' interest. It ended up sitting on his desk for the rest of the semester.

Had a fully active tech services office been available, this professor could have discussed what he had learned with its staff members. They could have worked with him to study the pedagogy behind utilizing robots in the classroom. Finally, they could have helped him start small, with a single class, to see what worked and what didn't. What was a failed experiment instead could have become a vital addition to this professor's teaching.

### **Overcome the Obstacles**

While an active technology service office is critical to a business school, three major obstacles might prevent a school from putting one in place. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable.

*Finding the funding.* Even schools without funds at the ready to create a technology services office can find ways to secure finances. They can apply for federal and private grants; they also can solicit gifts from corporations, alumni, or friends of the college known to be interested in technological projects. In addition, they can approach publishers whose textbooks are directly linked to software and ask the publishers to provide the programs; other companies may be willing to provide computer equipment.

Administrators also should be sure to let the school's development office know of the need for funding to back

faculty IT projects. It is amazing how often the development staff is simply not aware of a need for funding earmarked for technological experimentation. By pursuing this avenue, for example, one school received \$100,000 annually from a donor who specified that the funds be used to fulfill "technology needs." With that donation, the school implemented a technology initiative program that encouraged faculty to apply for funding to support their technology experiments.

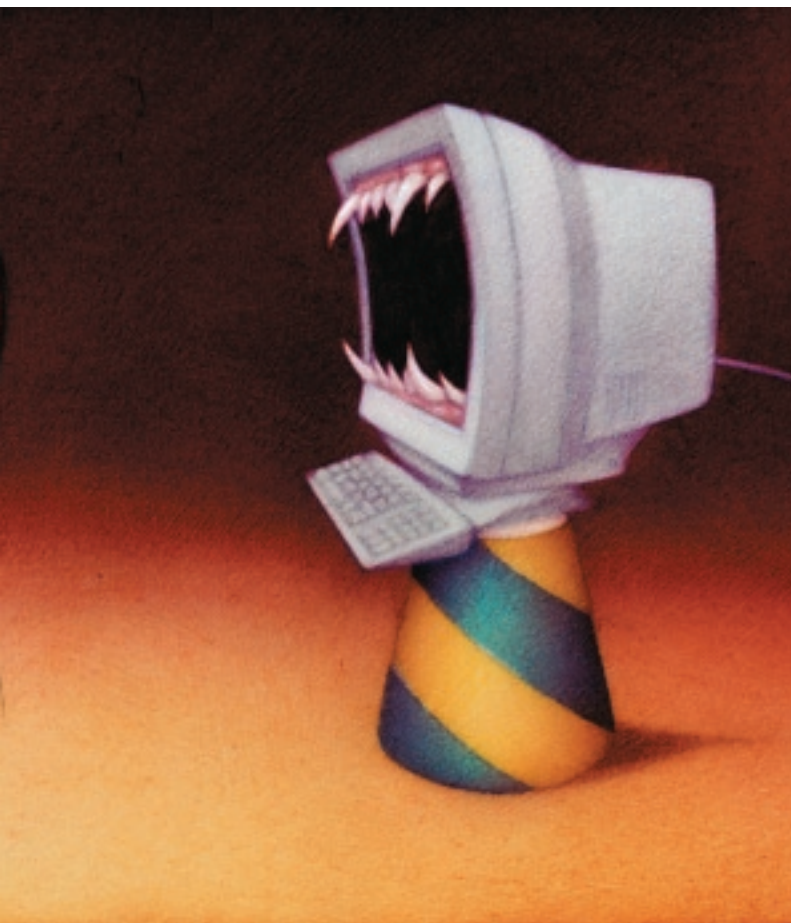
*Hiring the right staff.* It doesn't matter how much tech funding a school receives or how many pieces of equipment a company donates if a school doesn't have enough IT staff to utilize the new resources. It's important to make donors aware of the importance of funding IT staff as well as IT tools. Ideally, a technology services office will include at least one systems administrator, one help desk specialist, one application developer, one Web site devel-



oper, and one instructional technologist who can determine the best ways to work technology into a school's individual curriculum.

If it's not possible to assemble such a group, don't forget the untapped talent elsewhere on campus. Look into hiring computer science or education students who can help faculty while refining their skills. Business schools at larger universities also can call on their campuses' central IT offices for guidance.

*Dedicating the space.* Providing a testing space for an active IT office is of utmost importance for this experimentation model to work. For schools with little room to spare, start small: A corner in a computer lab or a table in the faculty lounge could be a place to start to encourage technological experimentation. As more faculty take advantage of the service, a small area eventually can be expanded into its own office.



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## Get Faculty Through the Door

At the Tippie College of Business, we have two Web developers, two application developers, an IT security officer, a systems administrator, a digital media expert, and two instructional technologists available to help professors. Even so, our biggest challenge is to get them to come to our office! While faculty understand our technical backgrounds and respect our skills, many don't think of coming to us for help in pedagogy and instructional design.

We plan to expand our outreach efforts, so that we'll be on faculty's radar when they begin to design their courses. We've created the Faculty Initiative Fund, for instance, where faculty can apply for funding to try new uses for technology in the classroom. Last spring, an economics professor received funding to acquire an interactive tablet PC that he can carry with him as he walks freely around the class of more than 300 students, using it to send notes and other information to the central projection screen for all to see.

We also want our faculty to understand that they don't have to know about technology to come to us for help. If they have a question about instructional design, we want them to think of us first, so that we can explore the possibilities with them. Do they want to make their materials more accessible? Do they want to track their students' progress? Do they want more freedom to walk around the classroom? Once they identify a problem, they can leave it up to us to determine whether technology provides the solution.

## Spark the IT Conversation

If a school wants to add a technology services office—or improve one it already has—administrators must look beyond what faculty and staff say they need and instead determine what they *don't* say. That is, administrators cannot assume that, just because faculty are not demanding more tech support, they don't need it. When a school's attention to IT experimentation has been neglected, faculty and staff often give up asking for what they want or discussing what they need.

Overall, a technology services office can help spark that discussion, as well as promote and provide opportunities to experiment. When a school offers faculty these technological opportunities, professors stay innovative in the classroom—and a business school keeps its position as an industry leader. **■**

Jim Chaffee is the director of the Stead Technology Services Group at the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business in Iowa City.