

6 Ways to Bridge the Gap Between Faculty and IT

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IT Management

Finding your own "unicorn" and other ways to create healthier relationships between academia and the IT department.

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The relationship between academia and technology is notoriously complicated. Faculty often view IT staffers as gadget-mongers eager to roll out new tech regardless of its value to teaching and learning, while technology specialists are certain they could make life easier for those on the other side — if they'd only listen!

"We're talking a similar language," said Rovy Branon, vice provost for educational outreach at the [University of Washington](#), "but sometimes we're talking past each other."

In some cases, people with conflicting goals and world views manage to coexist peacefully. However, as technology permeates society and becomes more accessible to more individuals, as Big Data, massive amounts of information,

becomes available to researchers — largely because of the advent of advanced technologies — the need for professors, researchers and IT professionals to work together becomes more urgent.

Many of the problems the two camps have in working together are rooted less in any unique characteristics associated with academia or technology, but derive simply from the fact that human beings, with all their foibles, are involved. Indeed, professors and researchers often are as stressed about their workloads as anybody and don't always see the value of investing time in learning a new technology, even if they're told it could make life easier for them.

"Faculty members are busy," said Paul Kim, chief technology officer at the [Stanford University](#) Graduate School of Education. "They are pressured to produce a lot. It's difficult for them to spend a lot of time learning something new."

Complicating matters is another very human problem: poor communication skills. Users of technology everywhere often find it hard to explain what they want and technology providers can't always read people's minds. There is also the tendency to worry that the use — or non-use — of new technology may threaten one's job security.

"People ask themselves, 'Does this eliminate my job?'" Branon noted, "or change my job to the extent that it's not what I signed up for?"

Finally, there is often just a clash of priorities.

"On the academic side, the priority is teaching and delivering learning experiences," said Andrew Feldstein, associate vice president of the Learning Technologies group at [Fort Hays State University](#) (KS). "On the technology side, there are infrastructure issues that have to be taken into account. What's expedient for the academic side may not be expedient for the technology side and vice versa."

But there are workarounds and strategies — and sometimes just tricks — that colleges and universities have found to make the interaction between the academic and technology worlds more comfortable. Here are six suggestions from faculty and IT professionals who have worked to resolve the dilemma.

1) Educate the IT Side

Before Branon took his current position at Washington, he had experience as both a faculty member and a technology professional. He'd also worked in business. He said the academia-IT gap is not always caused by intractable faculty and, if IT were able to understand a bit more about the larger goals of the university, it might be easier to offer and explain what it can provide.

"I'm increasingly saying to IT that it has to not just present solutions, but to understand the business of what we do and not just say, 'Here's the solution,'" Branon said.

2) Appoint an Official Go-Between

That's what Fort Hays did when it hired Feldstein late last year, with the specific charge to help academics and IT understand each side's needs and priorities a bit better. "The Learning Technologies group is where learning and technology intersect," he noted.

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