Where the Students Are…Computing Services at the Customer Source

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ABSTRACT

Information and Access Technology Services at the University of Missouri-Columbia has long struggled with its physical location on the edge of campus. In my 20+ years of experience we have consistently been on the far east or north edge of campus. For many years no parking was adjacent to the building. In the late 80's we did a brief stint in a building actually surrounded by a parking lot (we were still on the north side, mind you, but at least we had parking). However in 1997 we moved across the street (even further north of campus) but the parking lot stayed where it was.

Students have always found our locations inconvenient to their predominantly foot-based traffic. During our tenure on the east edge of campus we encouraged customers to visit by locating the Help Desk (and the only late night computing lab) in that building as well. That was successful until computing grew to require more labs distributed around campus and we opened another 24-hour facility.

With our first move to the northwest edge of campus we emphasized the close parking (not actually open to students, however). We continued the ploy of keeping the Help Desk adjacent to a late night computing lab in this building. We also beefed up the Help Desk consulting staff by hiring graduate students to extend the quality and quantity of consulting help available. Other services that brought customers to our building included computer hardware repair and an office to sell deeply discounted software.

The last move took us only across the street but saw a drastic change in orientation. Yes, we still sold software and repaired hardware from the new location. But gone was the computing lab and orientation towards walk-up consulting. Was walk-up consulting actually needed at the administrative building? The thought was that it was not crucial. By this time we had 13 general access computing labs and 30 residence hall labs. The consulting staff in these facilities included 5 full-time employees, 5 graduate students, and 150+ students. Two computing labs were open 24 hours/day. Since we did no walk-up consulting, we also reduced our help desk hours (based on call averages). With all that consulting available around campus, what more could a customer need?

Apparently walk-up consulting!

Keywords
Student Services, consulting, software sales, hardware repair.

1. THE HISTORY
As with most colleges and universities, our computing organization has struggled for the last two decades on how to provide excellent customer service to computing customers while managing costs. Another tangle in this knot is the question of selling or reselling computers and software….should we or shouldn't we? Should we sell to students or just faculty/staff? Should there be individual sales or just sales to departments? And always, what kind of after-the-sale support should be offered? Sometimes it feels like we've done it all!

In approximately 1984, Academic Computing opened its Demo Room, a location designed for faculty, staff, and departments to test-drive microcomputers and software before buying. Its elegant location was a hallway outside two offices occupied by the consultants dedicated to assisting customers. Consulting staff assisted with filling out paper work to ensure departments received the correct equipment and spent hours demonstrating various software packages to an array of customers. The success of this venture led to the creation of a university computer store where students, in addition to department purchases, also could take advantage of educational pricing on equipment and software.

From a business and a location perspective it made sense for this facility to move to the student bookstore so the operation was transferred to that unit and Academic Computing got out of the hardware demonstration business.

Or did we? Microcomputers were still just mystical enough that customers continued to seek our advice. By now we had the first microcomputer lab operating in our building with a combination of full-time and part-time staff. In fact we officially opened a Help Desk in a corner of this lab in an effort to bring computing support more out in the open. Our departmental customers continued to seek our assistance in choosing the correct equipment and filling out their order forms. The Demo Room consulting staff continued to look for software packages for customers or direct them to current standards. And we opened a repair service to handle the numerous requests for HELP when equipment stopped working.

Slowly the Demo Room transformed from an equipment-based demonstration area to a software demonstration area. The software wars began (particularly word processing) and we quickly started looking for educational discounts on popular software. The university's Purchasing department was not equipped to handle complex software questions and looked to us for guidance in the same way we periodically still reviewed equipment requests.

Once we began evaluating software for purchase it was a quick step to negotiating prices and acting as a broker for the Columbia campus. And because the Columbia campus is the largest of the five University of Missouri system campuses, the smaller campuses quickly wanted to tag on to get better discounts for their departments and students. The first step is either the beginning of a great journey or the start down a slippery slope – either way Campus Computing (as we were now known) was well on its way.

In the late 80's we moved to a building purchased and renovated with a view toward combining all computing functions. (As Murphy would surely have predicted, before we got in there Human Resources was put on the first floor and split computing between the third and the basement.) So we left the northeast corner of campus and moved to the southwest corner of campus. Campus Computing administration took advantage of this opportunity to open a Site License Software office expressly for the sale of software and the negotiation of contracts for volume purchase agreements. We also had developed a homegrown suite of software for connecting to the university's computing resources and distributed that from this office as well. The Site License Office function now moved out of equipment recommendations to software sales and contracts only.

The mid 90's saw another reorganization and effort to truly combine all computing personnel in one building so we moved across the street (further off campus), again into a building purchased and renovated with this goal in mind. At least this time Murphy moved other computing people into the building with us so that even though we did not get the entire building as originally promised, at least our neighbors were library and system-wide computing staff. The Site License Software office moved upstairs to a real first floor entrance convenient to the main customer entrance. The software list now ranged from our homegrown Internet Access Suite to SAS and Microsoft; it continued to expand as money permitted. The Site License Software staff only sold software and negotiated contracts. All consulting was done through the Help Desk and the consulting group who were located just around the corner from Site License.

2. THE REST OF THE STORY

The next reorganization and name change (bringing us up to Information and Access Technology Services) also brought the decision to end walk up consulting at the administrative building. Complaints about our inconvenient location had never ceased, especially from students who frequently had no easy access to their vehicles. The new assistant vice chancellor heard our customers say they wanted us closer to the middle of campus. There would never be enough room to move the entire organization to the campus center but did we really need to?

Space was found in the student union, right at the heart of campus, for a walk-up consulting center. Now, what services should go there? And who were these services aimed at? The obvious answer was students. They had been the most vocal about our location and seemingly the most inconvenienced as we edged further and further off campus. The complaints became louder and more numerous as the number of computers students brought to campus rose…computers which stopped operating and needed repair. In addition the last reorganization combined us with telecommunications. Their building was on the southeast edge of campus, across a busy four-lane road from where students generally spend their time.

The obvious answer was to move student-oriented services to the middle of campus. What services did students mostly take advantage of? Software sales, hardware repair and software installation, software consulting (including virus removal and disk recovery), and assistance with login and password problems.

Thus was born the IAT Services Outpost, a conveniently located walk-up consulting center for delivery of computing and telecommunications most requested services. The services are available for students, faculty and staff, or departments. The traditional computing services include software sales, hardware repair and software installation, consulting on supported software, and assistance with login and password problems, virus removal, and disk recovery. The new telecommunication services include subscription for long distance in residence halls, subscription to the university's internet service provider, purchase of cable TV cables, and student access to TigerNet (the campus backbone) from the residence halls.

The primary customer is the student. The registrar confirms that 90% of the student population spends 80% of their time on campus in the classroom buildings adjacent to the student union. There also is a high percentage of staff in the same area. Since one of the main faculty/staff dining areas is located on the first floor of

the student union, many take advantage of their lunch hour to visit our location.

3. SMOOTH SAILING

There were and still are many challenges involved in setting up and making the Outpost a success.

Constant organizational change is one of them, including several changes in reporting structure and staff in its two-year existence. The Outpost is the confluence of several organizational services, those provided by telecommunications, those provided by the desktop support group, those provided by residence hall computing, and those provided by the customer service group. Each had its own traditions for service levels, expectations, and work habits that have had to be melded into a new model for delivering service. To the mix we add the business office.

The Outpost has strong ties to the organization's business office (we accept cash, credit, purchase cards, etc.) Thus the director of business operation feels strongly that the Outpost should report to him to guarantee correct cash handling and transaction processing.

Telecommunications has an excellent record on campus for delivering service within 24 hours. During the first weeks of offering telecom services through the Outpost, this commitment was occasionally missed. Why? For one thing, the Outpost did not know about the 24-hour turnaround commitment! Secondly, as with all reorganizations, the paper org chart was drawn but the trickle down was not addressed until problems arose – like 24-hour turnaround. Fortunately this problem was solved quickly through increased communication.

By the same token, as the first line of consulting, the director of Customer Service feels strongly that the Outpost should report to him. After all, if someone receives bad service (which, of course, never happens :-) who are they going to call? Thus to control the level of service provided and ensure continuity across all services, the Outpost does indeed report to Customer Service.

The solution is that the Outpost now reports to Customer Service after a 5-year period of reporting to the Director of Business Services. The needs of business services were addressed by having one Outpost staff member attend staff meetings, through regular meetings between the two directors (Customer Service and Business Service), and regular reporting by the Outpost manager. The Outpost manager automatically includes both directors on any sensitive communication (thefts, software licensing problems, etc.).

Outpost staff and business services staff work together on software licensing issues. Software review teams now include desktop consulting staff for technical review, business services staff for licensing issues and pricing, and Outpost staff for distribution issues.

Matrix management challenges also could have sunk the Outpost before it started. At opening, three different directors had responsibility for some aspect of Outpost offerings. The staff that worked at the Outpost reported to managers in these three areas. Yet one person was responsible for all daily activities at the Outpost. So who does an employee believe: the Outpost manager or their own day-to-day supervisor? Whose directions should an employee follow? When coupled with multiple directors with multiple agendas, the matrix was crumbling.

Again the basic solution was to move the entire Outpost structure to Customer Service. In particular this solved conflicts in service delivery between the software licensing section and the desktop consulting section. When each section reported to a different director, there were frequent rubs in service delivery. Most were caused by lack of communication as opposed to any ill intent. Yet they were very frustrating for the Outpost staff as each group seemed to pull against the other.

A project was begun to "reconfigure" the Outpost, i.e. identify each group, their responsibilities, and reporting structure. As this project comes to a close, a matrix of responsibilities is being developed, a mechanism for providing feedback to each supervisor on performance for all the employees who rotate through the Outpost each week, and a means for the Outpost manager to hold these temporary Outpost employees accountable to agreed upon services and service levels.

The challenge to bring these services to the campus community was great and fraught with potential failure. Yet the management team involved in delivering these services has learned to work together for the common goal of delivering high quality walk up sales, consulting, and services *where the students are*.