

**First Year Review of St. Lawrence University's
"Technology for Teaching Program"
Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**

Scott E. Siddall,
December 10, 1999

The purpose of this visit was to evaluate the activities of the first year of the "Technology for Teaching Project" and to suggest possible program activities to address concerns identified in the annual report. Prior to my visit to the St. Lawrence campus, I was provided with copies of the program proposal to the Mellon Foundation and the first year's annual report.

Mike Sedore arranged a series of meetings from the evening of Tuesday, November 16 through noon on Thursday, November 18. I had the opportunity to meet with the program's steering committee at the beginning and end of this schedule. I toured the campus with special focus on technology-equipped teaching spaces and offices. I interviewed ten members of the faculty including Bart Harloe and his staff involved with the library's geographic information project. I met with three students who are working to support faculty in their uses of technology. I met with Vice President and Academic Dean Tom Coburn, Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations Susan Pankey and Vice President for Information Technology Collen Knickerbocker as well as with Mike Sedore.

Progress and Recommendations

The reader is referred to the annual report for more detail on the activities of the first year of the program. I was very much impressed with the members of the faculty and administration with whom I met. The University's commitments to excellence in teaching, including the use of technology, are impressive, as is the success of the Mellon program's first year.

Thirty-eight faculty projects have been completed or are underway in the first year of the program. This is a significant success for the project and a tribute to the program developers, the faculty and to the senior administration of the university for supporting information technology as a strategic resource. **Relative to other teaching with technology initiatives with which this reviewer has knowledge, the St. Lawrence program has done very well in this first year.** Thirty-eight projects is more than three times the number of projects underway in the first year of the Mellon project at Denison University and Kenyon College. The level of faculty engagement is significantly more than that at two other Mellon-funded programs in New England and the Midwest. The personalized approach used by Mike Sedore to help faculty members develop and refine their proposals is probably a key to this success. It is also clear that Mike and the members of the steering committee are aware of areas in which further work is needed. Indeed, many of my recommendations are extensions of conversations that Mike initiated during my visit.

Projects to develop new courses or to redesign existing courses to use technology should continue to be a priority. I saw significant uses planned or in place for PowerPoint presentations in courses; from the descriptions these appear to be pedagogically sound projects. I would examine carefully the long-term uses of presentation software that tends to structure content in a simplified, outline format. There are very good uses of PowerPoint for organizing materials and oral presentations. The complexity and nonlinearity of the web is preferred as a learning tool, the links of which can mirror the relationships we seek to understand in the liberal arts. PowerPoint and related tools are easily adapted by mainstream faculty who may find other tools difficult to master. PowerPoint is a great starting point for their engagement with classroom technologies, but it should not become the end point. Students may tire quickly of classroom presentations if they are oversimplified and inaccessible outside of class. **I suggest that the faculty look at web-based course management software (such as CourseInfo or WebCT) as the next logical step in this adoption of technology.** Like PowerPoint, these web-based products are relatively easy to learn to use and but they also allow the instructor to present complex course materials in a diverse and engaging manner. Mike Sedore's one-on-one consultations with interested faculty can address some of these issues.

Initially, the program sought to provide released time to faculty for their involvement in technology projects. This approach has not worked. Faculty members indicated that they have not been able to locate qualified replacement instructors in the area. The curricular missions of neighboring institutions are sufficiently different that there are few opportunities for faculty exchanges. In some cases, it seems that the faculty members are willing to bypass opportunities for released time rather than compromise their courses or departmental offerings. Clearly, this faculty cares about their course offerings, but the need to release some of their time continues. **The administration and faculty need to “think out of the box” together on this issue to find ways to free up time for faculty to engage with new teaching methods.**

Some form of distributed learning might be helpful as a partial solution but it is certainly not a complete solution for sparing faculty time. For example, advanced students might participate in online or video conference sessions from other institutions while St. Lawrence faculty members provide some local support. Collaborative class projects using web technologies can enhance learning in advanced courses while dramatically changing the level of instructional effort (see <http://siddall.denison.edu/talks/cause97/> and the projects listed at <http://www.kenyon.edu/projects/>). Such pedagogical approaches change the nature of authority in the classroom and while they require faculty to adopt new approaches to teaching, they do not necessarily require our faculties to learn the underlying technologies. Faculty can foster student-to-student and student-to-faculty collaboration while managing technology projects driven by students. In our experience, these approaches enhance learning while conserving faculty time.

Additional approaches may be needed to engage other members of the faculty during the second and third years. The proposers of these projects are probably St. Lawrence’s early adopters of information technology. It is possible that these 38 projects were proposed quickly during the first year because of unmet needs of the past. The arrival of the Mellon funding combined with a renewed commitment by the institution to instructional technology has probably increased the number of first year proposals. Is interest among the remaining faculty sufficient to continue this level of project proposals? I recommend a continued effort for faculty exemplars to share their successes and frustrations with their colleagues. Peer examples have been very effective incentives for mainstream faculty to consider new approaches to teaching with technology. For example, brown bag lunches and teaching fairs that feature St. Lawrence faculty projects can be supplemented with seminars that bring in outside experts in the relevant disciplines.

Rather than focusing on the development of new course materials, **some of the first year projects have sought to increase the capabilities and comfort level of faculty and staff within a department.** The faculty proposers of such projects have taken on the role of faculty mentor for their department. This seems to have been a successful model and is worth pursuing as funds and faculty interests allow.

Untenured faculty leading such efforts should be cautious about the relative amount of time they spend on service roles that often consume far more time than initially predicted.

New approaches for supporting TTP projects (both existing and those being proposed) will be needed as a result of the large number of first year projects. Students in particular represent a valuable resource to meet these front line support needs. This is mentioned in the annual report, and steps are being taken to connect trained students to selected projects. **I recommend that this effort be expanded as quickly as resources permit, especially during the second semester of the 1999-00 academic year so that trained and experienced students are available in the summer of 2000.** Mike Sedore needs the resources so his work can focus on the broader issues of program management and student training rather than direct technical support. Mike indicated that the number of steering committee members has been increased. This is a good move that should also help Mike focus on faculty needs if the committee task forces have the time to work independently.

I met with at least one member of the faculty who was aware of the TTP but elected not to engage with its opportunities, yet he impressed me as a teacher dedicated to his students’ learning outcomes. Some prior experiences with technology may have colored his reaction to the TTP announcements, but in general, he saw no gains in learning that might be based on uses of technology. He is not asking “how” to use the technology, as is often the case; he is asking “why” and sees no reason to engage. **It would be helpful to the institution’s mission to establish more forums for faculty to explore the possibilities of technology in the classroom before they engage in a training effort, or propose a project.** Certainly, Mike does this in a one-on-one fashion as he fosters the development of new proposals, but this misses the dynamic

that comes from faculty members seeing and discussing the possibilities together. There are many means to convene such conversations. For example, I have led teams that developed and delivered week-long summer institutes through which faculty members engage in diverse sessions on both technology and digital content. We compared this to a smorgasbord of learning technologies from which our faculty members could select those most appealing and relevant tools for later training. These sessions were heavily weighted with opportunities for faculty-led discussions about teaching. Notes from a CAUSE '94 pre-conference seminar on the summer institute model are available online at <http://siddall.denison.edu/talks/cause/index.htm>

I understand that one of the goals of the Information Technology Division is to enhance public awareness of St. Lawrence's achievements in technology. To that end, you might consider applying for membership in the New Media Centers (<http://www.newmediacenters.org/>). This non-profit group is seeking to add 25 new member institutions. The goal of the organization is to enhance teaching and learning through the use of the technologies that are being explored by the St. Lawrence faculty. This is only one forum, however, which might serve the dual purposes of increasing faculty awareness of the possibilities and increasing public awareness of St. Lawrence's uses of technology. Consider sending some of your faculty to other events (e.g., <http://www.furman.edu/symposium/>) that are announced regularly.

Future assessment activities for this program should examine carefully the outcomes of each of the projects funded by the program. How were the projects' goals met or modified? What was learned about teaching with technology, and what improvements would be made if the project were to be continued? This type of fundamental information about pedagogy could form the basis for seminars that would likely draw the attention of many St. Lawrence faculty members.

St. Lawrence University should be pleased with the first year progress of the "Technology for Teaching Project." If the project continues with this level of engagement, I'm confident that you will look back at this effort five years from now and see it as a genuinely transformative program.

Respectfully submitted,

Scott E. Siddall, Ph.D.
Director of Technology Integration
Denison University, Granville, Ohio
<http://siddall.denison.edu>