

The Power of Collaboration

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Background

The Appalachian College Association is a non-profit organization made up of 34 four-year colleges and universities in the central Appalachian region. The member institutions range from under 700 students to over 3,000 students within multi-campus environments. These colleges and universities are located in some of the most beautiful areas in the country, gently carved into the rolling Appalachian Mountains throughout a five state region. Its members share the goal of service to the people of the region through higher education and related services. The Association helps develop and share ideas, information, programs and resources to achieve its goals, which include promoting cooperation and collaboration among its member institutions to serve the people of Appalachia. The ACA functions independently of any one institution to serve all its members equally.

The ACA developed from a grant-funded project at the University of Kentucky over a 10-year period between 1980-1989. In 1990, the ACA became an independent organization, with its own tax-exempt classification status under Section 501(c)(3) of the 1986 Internal Revenue Service Code. Six research universities in the region (University of Kentucky, University of North Carolina, University of Tennessee, West Virginia University, University of Virginia, and Virginia Tech) are affiliated with the ACA. These institutions assist the ACA in reviewing grant and fellowship applications and conducting workshops. The ACA's assets have grown from less than \$1 million to approximately \$10 million due primarily to the generosity of the foundations that have continued to fund its programs to benefit central Appalachia.

During the initial period of service in the early 90's the Appalachian College Association focused on the support of our member institution's faculty, as this was the focus of the initial project leading up to the formation of the association. After realizing many successful projects in this area it became apparent that there were tremendous avenues available for expansion of the association's focus. The ACA slowly began to diversify the types of programs offered as well as the content within some existing programs. This diversification would lead to the formation of programs such as the "Central Library", the "Appalachian Collegiate Business Programs Asso-

ciation”, “Virtual Center”, “Laptop Lab”, “Multi-Media Lab”, and the “Information Technology Collaborative Group”. Continuing to grow and expand these programs helped shape the future of the Appalachian College Association as they changed the way in which the ACA supported its faculty. Continuing the ACA’s vision that faculty are key to a successful institution, but realizing that underlying foundations and infrastructures were extremely important to the success of faculty and the classroom of the future, caused the ACA to shift a great amount of energy into the following areas.

The Central Library

In 1997 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded the ACA funding to work with the college libraries, initially using JSTOR as the cornerstone for developing library technological resources for ACA campuses. By the end of 1998, 25 libraries received ACA support for JSTOR, while 3 subscribed independently. Today, the Central Library is the largest project held within the ACA and consistently provides exceptional benefit to the member colleges and universities. This project not only provides financial relief to our small member libraries but also creates a network of librarians among the member institutions that function as a single entity. Programs range from collaborative purchasing of online databases to the centralized hosting of proxy services for each library. Due to the consistent returns and growth the Central Library project has been a driving force in the adoption of centralized services within the Appalachian College Association.

As an example of this demand one of the centralized products currently hosted at the ACA headquarters in Berea, KY are the Library Proxy Servers. This is one of the most recent examples of the power of collaboration the ACA can offer and an example that we believe demonstrates a need to continue such programs. Software costs were reduced through the purchase of one site license, compared to purchasing each individual campus a site license, and immediate financial benefit to the institutions was realized. Hardware costs were reduced through the purchase of 6 systems capable of hosting multiple services, compared to the purchase of 34 systems required to hold each individual service. Thus the power of today’s equipment was harnessed to its full extent in order to increase the efficiency of hosting this type of application. In a sense the institutions are outsourcing their needs for technology expansion, yet they are outsourcing to an environment that is essentially “owned” by the institutions. This translates into realized gain as well as administrative control and collaboration.

As the Central Library grows and new projects are developed it becomes one of the largest users of space, equipment, and bandwidth within the centralized structure of the Appalachian College Association’s technology adoption. At this time the Central Library program has 8 physical servers hosting multiple services that range from a digital library server to a database of all the faculty members within the association. With the services currently in place and the proposed future adoptions the Central Library is still one of the largest driving forces behind the construction of the ACA technology center and as confidence and knowledge grows so do the possibilities realized by the participating libraries. While technology usage and expectations expand dramatically in higher education and beyond, the ACA is continuing to devote time and energy into the adoption and expansion of the vital resource for its member colleges and universities.

Building a New Foundation

The power of collaboration has produced visible effects within two categories, one being the member institutions and the other being the association itself. Within the institutions there has been a growing “knowledge base” of possibilities. What once was deemed impossible is now entertained as possible until proven otherwise. This effect then causes a more open environment for statements resembling “what if we could do this...” as opposed to earlier times when ideas of a larger nature were not being realized due to a lack of funding and possibly even the time needed to implement. Through this very interaction the association realized that the power of collaboration was now molding the focus of future funding requests. There is considerable need to continue supporting the faculty, but the way in which the support is to be realized is changing. In response to this trend the Appalachian College Association is currently seeking funding that will support the creation, adoption, and use of enhanced technological systems throughout the member institutions.

This funding focus has been labeled, the ACA Quad with the idea that this new focus will be the quadrangle of the member institutions, and just as it does on each campus, it will serve to tie the different areas of emphasis together under one common goal. Under this new initiative the ACA is seeking to increase its ability to provide assistance and support in the area of technology systems and services. Funding in this area will be used to provide on campus support for technology such as bandwidth management, caching, and content filtering all of which are vital to the operation of an institution in today’s educational environment. Other major goals within this area include the consistent support for training, meetings, and collaborative ventures of the campus Information Technology staff as well as the continued support of centralized services.

Upon this new foundation or Quad, the Appalachian College Association and its members have begun to build and plan for centralized services such as multiple course management systems, an administrative system, multiple library catalog systems, e-reserve system, streaming humanitarian movies, and other systems yet to be determined by the growing knowledge base. The quad is currently supporting a WebCT server in use by four institutions in multiple states and is expected to increase its institutional usage over the next few months. As programs of this nature continue to grow, the power of collaboration forces the Quad to adopt new technologies and to increase its ability to provide efficient, reliable, and cost effective services. The constant cyclical discovery of new products and innovations by our 34 member knowledge base will continue to drive the power of collaboration which, as stated above, will provide effective positioning of the Quad in order to adjust our focus so that the Association can provide the optimal amount of assistance in order to create the maximum benefit.

Information Technology Collaborative Group

The Information Technology Collaborative Group was established in February, 2002. The group was formed by motivated participants of the ACA Technology forum that met one to two times a year. Four representatives from three of the five ACA states made up the initial Steering Committee that established the goals of the ITCG to be collaboration and support between the IT staff of the schools, to create a new IT staff strand at the annual ACA Technology Summit, and create interest for ACA schools not actively participating to join the ITCG.

Prior to the formation of the ITCG the project creating the most impact within the ACA regarding Information Technology was the Student Technical Assistant (STA) program. The STA program, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation was established in 1997. The STA program was developed to give students at ACA institutions the opportunity to prove their worth as technicians while fine tuning their skills. Secondly, the STA program assisted the understaffed IT offices with additional help. Annually the program holds technical and non-technical training at two different central sites within the ACA. The technical training consists of hardware repair, software repair, networking, and troubleshooting. The non-technical training consists of honing communication skills and leadership skills among the students. Early on the coordinators of this project established the non-technical side of the training knowing that additional help with hardware and software would be of little value without the communication and leadership skills necessary to collaborate with various students, faculty, and staff that they would come in contact with. Several have dedicated numerous hours to this program to ensure the success of the project, but one IT Director at a school in Milligan, TN has personally given unselfishly to see that the students continue with the opportunity to partake in this program.

With the help of the ACA IT Director, the ITCG has capitalized on the power of collaboration by actively seeking vendors that will work with the consortium to bring the “power of numbers” to small college campuses in Appalachia so they can experience the same price slashing that large universities see with hardware and software. Online stores have been developed specifically for ACA institutions configured in such a way to benefit the needs of the small institutions. The group has also established regular meetings three times a year to share information, network with others, identify common threads, and collaborate on new ideas.

Future project possibilities include assistance in funding numerous endeavors such as: a central library server, central proxy services, central courseware server, central bandwidth, distribution and training for packet shaper/web caching/web filtering devices, and IT staff retreat opportunities.

ACA Tech Summit

The first annual ACA Tech Summit was held in October, 1998. The original Summit was to be a way in which faculty at ACA institutions could showcase their “teaching with technology” projects. Like the original focus of the ACA the original Tech Summit very heavily favored the participation of faculty and the sharing of ideas among faculty. At the second annual ACA Tech Summit in 1999 the ACA STA program took center stage. The idea for STA’s from various campuses within the ACA to provide technical support to the faculty demonstrating their products of the classroom was a phenomenal idea. The opportunity for presenters and facilitators at the Tech Summit to have several well trained technical assistants coupled with the prospect of a student providing this support at a major event within the ACA was quite the showstopper. ACA Tech Summit attendees quickly took notice to these well trained, qualified student helpers and quickly gave them the respect that they had so earned.

Over the years the Tech Summit has transformed from a faculty driven two day conference to a three day conference (including pre-conference strand focused events) with activities for stu-

dents, faculty, and staff alike. Hands-on training workshops, technical training, birds of a feather discussions, poster sessions, vendor showcase areas, and numerous presentations are some of the highlights at the more recent Summits. At the 2002 Summit the Information Technology staff saw the birth of a strand for technical staff that provide the foundation for which academic and administrative systems and programs stem from on the 34 ACA campuses. The first year for the strand provided technical training for network administrators in the area of Microsoft's Active Directory. This training provided 28 network administrators and/or assistants the opportunity to learn more about this complex tool free of charge to the institutions. Technical presentations were made available to 108 participants on 7 different topics and wrapping up the strand was the birds of a feather session laying out the foundation for new avenues available through collaborative efforts and new programs like the "Quad Project."

Conclusion

The Appalachian College Association provides 34 colleges and universities throughout Appalachia America with opportunities that would not be otherwise available without the collaborative push that it provides. Limitless are the possibilities that lay ahead for the youth of this region with dedicated faculty and staff working hand in hand with devoted ACA staff supporting the five states of West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina.