



TECHNICAL COLLEGE TEAMS WITH DATALIANT TO SOLVE IT PROBLEMS

As you might expect, IT plays a big role at a school like Gwinnett Technical College. The suburban Atlanta, Georgia institution, which grants associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates in many tech-related programs, has 57 computer labs and nearly 1500 computers. It also offers an extensive catalog of online courses through an increasingly popular virtual campus program. So when IT reliability began to slip in 2002, the college's administration knew it had to take decisive action.

"We had a lot of issues that involved hardware, software, and peopleware," says Trina Boteler, Gwinnett Tech vice president of academic affairs. "There was a perception in our community that the IT Department wasn't being responsive in addressing these problems. We decided we needed new leadership and a change in culture."

President Devises Novel CIO Strategy

Hiring a chief information officer (CIO) to bring about these transformations seemed like a logical course of action, but Gwinnett Tech didn't have the budget for a new senior-level administrator. Instead, President Sharon Rigsby devised a novel plan for acquiring the expertise the school needed while keeping costs under control. Rigsby asked Dataliant, Inc. to step in and provide a CIO on a part-time basis.

"It was a model that we had used for marketing and a strategy that we thought might work equally well in IT," says Rigsby. "What we found in both of these areas was that the type of leader we could afford on the open market did not have the level of expertise or breadth of resources to achieve our goals."

"It seemed like a workable arrangement to us," says Patrick Rohde, President of Dataliant. "But we needed to make it as revenue-neutral as possible, which meant we had to look for efficiencies and savings to offset the costs of outsourcing and making the infrastructure better."

Three-Phase Process Leads to Stronger Infrastructure

Rohde assumed the role of CIO and launched a three-phase plan for improving the college's technology infrastructure. Phase one involved using in-house and Dataliant resources to stabilize the campus network and plug security holes that were leaving the school vulnerable to cyber attack. Staffing in the IT Department was also reviewed and a number of open IT positions were not filled to provide funding for outsourced IT services.

In 2003, phase two work focused on further upgrading and improving the infrastructure. Dataliant and IT Department personnel collaborated to consolidate the college's existing servers in a central data center, split the network into separate nodes for student and faculty users, and implement software upgrades using Microsoft Windows Server 2003 and Exchange 2003. Splitting the network and consolidating its servers simplified maintenance and allowed the staff to install new firewalls that further enhanced security.

Phase three work began in 2004 and involved some of the school's most ambitious projects. The IT Department, supported by Dataliant personnel, is currently implementing a new, secure student email system and a campus intranet solution. IT is also pursuing enhancements to ensure business continuity.

Rohde leadership during each phase is paying noticeable dividends, according to Boteler. "We now have a very reliable infrastructure," she says. "It's rare for a lab to go down. Our IT Department also operates differently. They are totally into collaborative problem solving. They don't just impose solutions."

Rigsby agrees. "IT performance has definitely improved in the last year," she says. "The department is organized, focused, and really above-par based on what I hear from other college presidents."

Mentoring Helps IT Staff Respond

IT Department director Deborah McLendon also feels that the recent changes have helped to create a more effective, responsive technology organization. The new CIO position ensures that IT issues are considered whenever senior officials meet to discuss institutional needs and priorities.

"We didn't have a champion before but now we do," says McLendon. "That's allowed us to reallocate resources and create things like the new data center. Now, our network is more organized and reliable, and our workload is much more distributed."

McLendon says her staff has also benefited from having access to professionals who routinely work in other types of technical environments. These ongoing interactions have fostered a mentoring relationship between Dataliant's staff and the personnel in her department.

"Dataliant has really become a support system for us," she says. "We sometimes have a list of questions for the Dataliant guys when they are on-site. They either give us immediate answers or go off and research the answer. It's like having our own personal help desk."

Rigsby says the arrangement has worked out from a budget standpoint as well. "The operating budget had to stay flat-and has," she says. "We have decided to invest in additional IT infrastructure that we probably wouldn't have in our previous circumstances."