

Summary of Focus Group Discussion

Classroom Improvement Focus Group (Instructors Attending)

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After Introductions we discussed:

What is it we need to do and what is difficult to do now?

Answers varied but much repeating the IT survey findings done in December 2004--no equipment in the rooms so we have to haul it around. Some just gave up as it is too much stuff, too many wires. We won't be competitive without better IT in classrooms. Need PowerPoint, DVD, CD, VHS, Web access, blackboards, 1 large or two screens, larger enrollments prevent teaching in PC classrooms, need support, fewer frustrations.

What will determine "success"?

1. Speed to get rooms equipped.
2. Consistency of equipment and its use from room to room
3. Reliable equipment with good support; both instructions and maintenance
4. Security so the equipment isn't ripped off or abused by users

What kind of Space do we need?

1. Good lighting with zone controls; especially ability to turn off the front back that would affect screen image. Tobin 204 is good. Do not need remote control of lights.
2. Window shades. Need to darken the room with dependable, easy and fast to use window coverings. Total blackout is needed some times. Use fewer panels to speed the process. Don't go with "lowest price". Do they have to be "off-white" as the AV consultant said another color would improve contrast and image quality.
3. AC is an issue as without it windows are opened, then wind blows the shades, and if left open the room is vulnerable to weather.
4. Whiteboard or Chalkboard? Chalkboard is preferred as whiteboards look messy, smell funny, and hard to erase cleanly. Hard to beat chalk. Smartboards are often troublesome and SchoolPads or Tablet PCs make them less needed to capture writing during class.
5. Screens; use corner locations to allow some board use. Use 2 screens when possible. Maintain blackboard or greenboard as long as dark and takes chalk well.
6. Lectern; fixed or movable. Stay flexible as the more expansive lecterns are difficult to move and limit ability to teach. We stand and move about to teach. Use a corner location for the AV cabinet to maintain room's flexibility. Keep it simple. We can handle just plugging in our laptop.
7. PC in the AV cabinet or bring your own laptop? Given the different preferences for platforms, software, and the additional need to then add keyboards and monitors to the AV cabinet when you install a computer in the room, let's go with laptops brought in by the instructor. Any chance that UMass would help instructors get one? Maybe good idea for professional development funds.
8. Table at front? Yes, but maybe 6 inches higher than standard or a flat lectern to place on the table to bring laptop up to a nice standing, working height.
9. Data Projector. The Sanyo 3,300 lumen projector in Tobin 204 is great. One or two? Some thought it was overkill others liked it but it adds greatly to the cost and adds some complexity to the equipment interface. We decided to plan and wire for two but just do one for now unless a room has a known need for two.
10. Document camera? Not too many interested at first but as others discussed its use more interest was generated. But adds up to \$4,000 per room, so when forced with either doing more rooms with more features or more rooms with only the basics, we chose to do more basic rooms over fewer rooms with more equipment.

Bottom Line:

Tobin 204 has it about right. So the basic IT package should include:

1. CD-DVD-VCR Combo unit,
2. One data projector; 3,300 lumen or better. Wire for a second data projector just in case more teachers want to images on two separate screens,
3. Room equipment monitoring unit
4. Audio with 4 ceiling speakers; if no access to ceiling (asbestos problems) then corner mounted.
5. Auxiliary jack for other needs,
6. Microphone capable
7. Screen (in corner if it works), blackboards across wall [and if room has side blackboards keep them and this will allow a center screen location over one of the blackboards], add a second screen when it works.
8. Easy to use AV controls with consistency room to room,
9. Good training
10. Good room support
11. Good 3-zone lighting,
12. Good window shades,
13. One overhead, or consider Document Camera
14. One table at front to serve as “flexible lectern”.
15. AV cabinet with all the equipment in an out of the way spot.

In short, what you see in Tobin 204 should be rolled out to far more rooms.

Note: there is no cassette player as these are not used often and a better alternative is to copy such material to a CD.

Next steps:

Write specifications to go out to bid this job for up to 100 classrooms over two years with the first 32 to get their IT packages late this fall.