Keeping an IS Program Viable by Offering IT Literacy as a Service Course: One Department's Response to Declining Enrollments

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Keeping an IS Program Viable by Offering IT Literacy as a Service Course: One Department’s Response to Declining Enrollments

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ABSTRACT
IS enrollments have been in decline for the past few years. This is disconcerting given the fact that the need for an IT literate workforce continues to increase. One way some colleges and universities might address this dilemma is through the development of an IT literacy course offered as a service course to the university community. Such a course has the potential to help maintain the viability of a slumping IS program via the unique prospects created by growing institutional interest in assessing and amplifying IT literacy.

Keywords
Information literacy, curriculum, information technology education.

INTRODUCTION
The sustained downturn in IS program enrollment continues to generate considerable interest. Early gloomy predictions have yielded to studies that identify root causes and propose strategies to address the decline (e.g., Looney and Akbulut, 2007; Granger, Dick, Jacobsen and Van Slyke, 2007). At the same time, the need for an educated workforce that is proficient at using and applying information technologies is more essential than it has ever been. Gaps are once again beginning to emerge between the supply of and demand for professionals with various computer skills. Ironically, in higher education, we are faced with the challenge of attracting more students into computing disciplines even as we enter the age of ubiquitous computing.

While much thought is being given as to how to address the decline in various computing degree programs, answers to another question also need to be explored. That question relates to how students, who have not expressed an interest in pursuing advanced studies in computing, might still be engaged so as to become well-rounded, informed and curious users of computer technologies. We argue that one way this might be done is through the development of an IT literacy course, offered as a service course to the university community. We also argue that it would be appropriate to host this type of course in an IS department and that for some departments it might provide a way to counter a drop in enrollment.

IT LITERACY COURSE
IT literacy courses in the curriculum are not new. However, this is an area that is experiencing renewed interest. While some institutions have computer literacy courses, others either never had such a course or abandoned it when many perceived students were entering the university well-versed in basic computer usage. Today, what we have found is that a gap is emerging between functional and analytical uses of computing technologies. Most students have access to computers but that exposure does not necessarily equate with understanding. As such, universities are once again investigating how the computer competence level of students might be raised.

To these ends, we developed an IT literacy course, IS 2101: Computers and Your World, that is poised to become a required core curriculum offering at our institution. The course consists of three modules: 1) hardware and operating systems; 2) productivity software; and 3) networks, the Internet and information literacy. The course is being offered through a combined Computer Science and Information Systems Department as a service course to the greater university community.
Consultation with chairs of departments that typically offer service courses (e.g., biology, English) provided insights that allowed us to anticipate challenges and leverage opportunities we might encounter. Those challenges centered upon meeting the needs of various disciplines as well meeting the resource needs typically associated with offering a new course.

The resource issue had a timely solution. Declining enrollments freed up faculty members to begin work on developing the new course. It also meant that faculty resources were available to teach the course. During its inaugural semester, Fall 2006, five sections of the course were offered. All of these sections were included in Learning Communities. Learning communities are composed of a cohort group of incoming freshmen enrolled in a common set of 3 courses. The intent of the Learning Community is to facilitate student transition into the university setting. The advantage to offering this course in this venue is that it provides an opportunity to introduce freshmen to the various computing disciplines and various computing majors offered at the University. In the following semester, the course was opened to the university community with five sections offered. Only one of these sections was included as part of a Learning Community. In the subsequent semesters, multiple sections of ‘Computers and Your World’ have been offered.

Meeting the needs of various disciplines is more challenging. Through various mediums such as faculty workshops on IT literacy, individual discussions with faculty and interviews with IS professionals, various emphasis areas were identified. For example, the most often cited need was for students to develop a higher level of functional skill in using productivity software, specifically components of Microsoft Word, Excel and Access. Consequently, we strengthened the module on productivity software incorporating various project-based activities.

The course has been well received by the university community. At its commencement, the course was not a required course by any major but was an elective offering. However beginning in the next academic year, ‘Computers and Your World’ will be required by both the Information Systems and the Communication degree programs. Other departments, such as psychology and history, have also expressed an interest in incorporating the course as part of their degree requirements. Our desire is for the course to eventually become a university-wide requirement that is part of the general education program taken by all undergraduate students.

DISCUSSION

Academic programs experiencing enrollment declines often need to find ways to maintain their viability. In the field of computing, renewed interest in assessing and amplifying IT literacy has created a unique opportunity for IS programs. However, the benefits and challenges of offering a service course need further exploration. For instance, in our department, we surveyed colleagues to see if they shared the view that all students, regardless of major, should be required to complete an IT literacy course. There was strong agreement on the desirability of requiring an IT literacy course, and general agreement that benefits accrue to the department from offering a service course to the institution. It is also noteworthy, however, that many of our colleagues felt less than enthusiastic about themselves teaching such a course.

The benefits and drawbacks of offering a service course must also be investigated. We have noted that several students enrolled in ‘Computers and Your World’ subsequently declared a major in one of the computing degrees we offered. We also know, through anecdotal reports, that their participation in the course and interaction with the faculty member teaching the course had an influence on their choice of majors. On the other hand, some perceive that such a course might place an undue strain on valuable resources such as faculty time and effort. This paper presentation will explore, with the audience, possible long-term benefits and drawbacks of an IS program offering an IT literacy course open to all students in the university population.

REFERENCES