"STRAIGHT TALK: THE PROVOSTS' AND DEANS'
VIEWS ON ETDs"

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The following remarks are a synthesis of the comments I delivered on March 17, 2000 at the above noted plenary panel. The order has been modified slightly to fit this written presentation.

I was pleased to be on the panel and to offer my endorsement and support for submission of electronic theses and dissertations because I believe ETDs represent another example of the changing academic culture on America's campuses.

Historical Perspective.

West Virginia University began exploring the concept of ETDs in the fall 1995 semester in response to a meeting on the Monticello Library Project. With the preliminary groundwork laid on campus, the institution moved forward to develop its ETD program during the 1997-98 academic year.

An Implementation Team, composed of faculty, librarians, and information technology personnel, was formed. The Team established three working groups with broad campus-wide participation. The working groups focused on technological, human, and educational issues surrounding the change to an ETD format. The technology group investigated the broad suite of technological requirements including software, hardware, storage, preservation, format, and support. The human resources group focused their efforts on developing policies and procedures taking into account

specific college and/or departmental needs. The educational resources working group was responsible for gaining campus acceptance of the program and made numerous presentations to educate the campus community, to demonstrate the process, and to remove fears and objections to the initiative. Members of the Implementation Team also visited Virginia Tech, the pioneering institutional leader in the use of ETDs.

After a year of extensive planning, communication, and hard work, West Virginia University initiated its program in August 1998, requiring all students, regardless of discipline, to submit their theses or dissertations in an electronic format. After 18 months, nearly 500 documents have been archived. Access is increasing monthly especially from off-campus readers. For example, one dissertation has been accessed over 2,500 times, others over 1,000 times. It is clear that ETDs provide a far greater sharing of research results and exposure for new ideas than the traditional written format.

Lessons Learned.

In keeping with the topic of "straight talk," I have chosen to address briefly several issues that made our implementation successful.

1. Leadership. Leaders have the responsibility to identify new horizons and direct campus efforts in particular directions. Leadership from the Provost and/or a senior academic administrator is critical because it signals the importance of the development of ETDs and empowers the campus community to move ahead. In charging the Implementation Team, I asked, "how," not "if," to implement an ETD program.

    One caveat is important to note, namely the culture at WVU may or may not reflect the culture at another campus. Thus leadership is situational and adaptations to our implementation strategy must reflect campus specific traditions and culture.

2. Involvement. Our efforts involved faculty, staff, and students in the planning through the working groups as well as with the Implementation Team. This involvement is also another form

of leadership, leadership in a strategic, and perhaps more importantly, in a tactical sense. Once empowered, you must give these pioneers and risk takers the responsibility to plan and execute their efforts. This was the case at WVU. These individuals collectively are responsible for our program.

3. Adapt, Don't Invent. I cannot say enough about the help that the personnel at Virginia Tech provided to our efforts. They most graciously shared fully their ideas and procedures with us. Our Implementation Team adapted what they learned from Virginia Tech to our situation at WVU.

4. Communicate. You can never communicate enough. We say this again and again, but it remains true especially when venturing forward to bring about a change as big as mandating ETDs across campus. The communication process (in person, via paper, or through various electronic formats) allowed the Implementation Team to share ideas fully, to educate the campus, to respond to and remove obstacles, and to build buy-in.

5. Cooperation. As Provost, I expect cooperation from the unit heads of the Library, the Office of Information Technology, and our Graduate Office. (We do not have a Graduate School at WVU; Deans certify that students fulfill the requirements for graduation.) Furthermore, those on our Implementation Team chose to participate, and thus we had an excellent committee that worked well and hard together and demonstrated the greatest measure of cooperation to succeed in their task. The end result validated their commitment and resolve.

6. Support. To help the Implementation Team, you need to expect some one-time development costs such as current expense and travel support as well as a graduate student. These costs are not large relative to the overall impact of the project. Such costs should be borne centrally by the Office of the Provost.

    ETDs do have a long-term impact on academic computing and the campus library system. There is a need to recognize that

work will be done differently. New hardware and software may be required and ongoing faculty development support will be needed. Again, these are central costs, while the restructuring of staff support, as in our case, was expected of Academic Computing and the Library.

Finally, the institution cannot overlook the need for technical support for the graduate students as they ask questions relative to the design and submission of their work in an electronic format. Both Academic Computing and Library personnel provide such support at WVU. Paper and electronically formatted guidelines are readily available as are special workshops and development sessions for students.

Academic Impact.

1. Acceptance. On the WVU campus, the implementation of required ETDs was readily accepted. Faculty advisors and students endorsed the concept. While provisions were made for exceptions during the first year, none were needed. The educational resources working group deserves the credit for the successful implementation of this activity. I would also heartily endorse the operational approach we used, that is to go live and make it required rather than optional from the onset. There may be some initial issues to resolve, but in the long-term, there is but one policy for the entire campus.

   There was one humanities department on campus that was less accepting of the ETD program. The faculty and students were concerned about the potential impact that the electronic format would have on future publishing of a monograph. They were also concerned about the potential for a future negative promotion and tenure decision in a department that would not look favorably on an ETD. This humanities department had a member on the Implementation Team and on one of the working groups, yet claimed it was unaware of the changes that were being imposed. The Implementation Team worked with the faculty and students of the department to remove their objections

through the use of an embargo policy. Open communication and involvement of the stakeholders helped resolve this problem.

2. Assessment. Students were generally quite accepting of the opportunity to put their work into an electronic format. In fact many have remarked positively about the breadth of information that can now be a part of their archival material as they are not limited by traditional written constructs.

    Some librarians were nervous about not having a paper product for archival purposes. We decided, however, that some risk was necessary, and that we would make a total campus-wide conversion to ETDs rather than pilot an optional conversion to ETDs. The transformation has occurred with minimal negative impact. The written thesis or dissertation is now a part of the past at WVU. This is not to say, however, that preservation is not a major concern, but at WVU we needed to move forward with digital technology. Electronic backup copies of the ETD database are maintained and stored remotely. As software upgrades are released, we monitor their impact on accessibility to earlier files. If preservation does become a problem, we will address it at that time.

    On a positive note, the increased access to ideas and new data has made the work of our students more dynamic and of interest to a greater audience. It also may directly lead to enhanced scholarship. Because the work is so readily available, faculty are more concerned about a student's work because it is now immediately available for peer review.

The electronic thesis and dissertation is another example of change that is having an impact on our approach to higher education. It is new and different, yet exciting. I am pleased at how our campus has accepted this change and pushed forward the horizon on expanding our access to and distribution of scholarly work.

For more information of a technical nature, please contact Mr. John Hagen, Library Technical Consultant at jhagen2@wvu.edu.