

**“Win-Win-Win: A scalable cost recovery IT unit in a decentralized environment”**

**Robert Howard**

Director, Campus Information Technology Partnerships  
Enterprise Information Technology Services  
The University of Georgia

**Abstract**

The University of Georgia's Campus Information Technology Partnerships (CITP) is a cost recovery unit within the central IT group that provides support in a decentralized campus environment. CITP reduces Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) with fractional time (e.g., 5-40hrs/wk) service level agreements. CITP can provide affordable expertise and depth of staff to departments with definite needs but no budget for full time qualified IT staff. The central IT group can shed the unfunded mandate of departmental support. CITP effectively decreases attrition by providing access to managed growth opportunities not available in small IT groups and maintains Institutional Memory for continuity during unavoidable periods of attrition. CITP's value added service provides 'float' positions that serve departments during periods of leave, attrition, or high demand. CITP's depth results in increased problem solving efficiency and shorter learning curves. Knowledge transfer occurs without the duplication of efforts. Since CITP is not mandated, departments have the benefits of a centralized IT group but maintain control of priorities and budgets. As CITP is delivered through service level agreements that can be canceled or not renewed, accountability and responsibility to maintain client satisfaction is present in a way that is unlikely in a completely centralized environment.

The University of Georgia, America's oldest state chartered university, is a public land grant institution with over 31,000 students and approximately 10,000 faculty and staff members. Officers are as follows: President: Michael Adams; Senior VP for Academic Affairs and Provost: Arnett C. Mace (interim); Senior VP for Finance and Administration: Henry M. Huckaby; Associate Provost and CIO: Kirk Bertram. Germane to this submission the University of Georgia (UGA) possesses a very decentralized IT environment within the individual colleges, schools, and departments.

The CIO role at UGA is relatively new (less than five years), and from a historical perspective the central IT group on the campus did not adequately meet the departmental needs of the campus community. Therefore, each unit that wanted on site IT support carved out monies within their budget to have an IT department or in many cases a single individual who took care of their IT needs. Over the years, the University began to suffer from significant duplication of services and reduced efficiencies due to increased attrition and disconnection between the IT staff members and their departments. Many departments had a definite need for IT service, but not for a full time staff member (see Figure 1). They either transferred the Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) back to the Central IT group as an unfunded mandate or paid student labor or full time salaries that would only attract and retain the most inexperienced personnel. Student labor is a wonderful resource; however, putting trusted systems under the purview of individuals who have other priorities can be disastrous (e.g., studying for tests, class schedule conflicts with work needs, etc). Entry level workers can provide needed service; however, they need guidance to develop the skills needed to run the trusted systems. All too often, the entry

level person either is not able to carry out the higher order needs of a department leaving its IT systems in a precarious position or is incapable of making the IT plan fit the future business needs of the department. Individuals that do become proficient in these skills often move on for higher pay grades and opportunities for growth that are difficult for a small department to provide. This attrition seriously impacts the abilities of departments to maintain stability within core IT systems needed for them to fulfill their academic, research, or administrative function and significantly increases the TCO of IT systems. The CITP program was created under the CIO's organization to fulfill a need from departments who wish to gain the economies of scale of a central IT program while maintaining control of their own IT budgets and priorities.

CITP was created to provide a scalable, cost recovery IT solution for the colleges, school, and departments of UGA. The model was meant to increase availability of reliable, high quality IT service and to provide excellent management and career opportunities for IT staff, which leads to more productive staff and a lesser attrition rate. Both of the aforementioned functions serve to reduce TCO of IT service at the University, which is, of course, a principle dogma of the CIO's organization.

Departments have the freedom to purchase IT support in incremental units of time via a Service Level Agreement (SLA). The SLA serves to define expectation and demand to allow a productive relationship between the client department and CITP. The model allows departments to pay for the mean workflow needed for their department (see Figure 2). The cost structure developed was a value add proposition in which management, training, and 'float' positions for continuity were covered within the Service Level Agreement cost. Periods of high/excess demand or absence of the primary CITP support

staff (e.g., vacation, sick leave, etc.) are also covered by these 'float' positions. These costs are shared among the client base of CITP, which allows the total cost for these periods to be significantly less for each unit participating in the program than if they were to maintain individual redundant support systems.

The initial program was started by the CIO, Assistant CIO, and a senior staff member who would head up the pilot program. The CITP program began with three staff members and a client base of five departments who wished to participate in the pilot. The salaries and equipment were provided by the income from the SLA's between CITP and the client departments. There were no other expenses, other than a significant time commitment from the senior staff member and the Assistant CIO, incurred in the initiation of this program. The senior staff member initially dealt with management functions while still serving in a technical IT support role. There was obviously a pent up demand for such a service offering, as the program grew from three staff members and five clients to thirty five staff members and over thirty five clients in a one and a half year period. As anticipated, the senior staff member became full time management as the program scaled.

CITP provides semiannual satisfaction surveys, and it maintains a client satisfaction rate between 85-90% (statistical data can be provided upon request). The cost recovery nature of the program puts the impetus of maintaining high levels of client satisfaction on the CITP staff and management, or the client can discontinue service which could result in the loss of employment. This model is also designed to allow CITP to grow to meet the changing IT needs of UGA more rapidly than is typically possible from a large central IT group.

The University as a whole benefits from three basic audiences being served: the CIO's organization, the individual departments within UGA, and the IT staff. The CIO's organization can shed the unfunded mandate of departmental support and focus on centrally funded projects (e.g., email, financial systems, security, distributed learning initiatives, etc.) while providing an appropriate home for the cost recovery departmental IT support unit. The individual departments have a choice in whether to maintain their own IT program or use CITP. Those that use CITP can focus on their core mission of research, instruction, or administration knowing that their institutional knowledge is now retained by a group rather than an individual. Few departments could afford the depth and range of expertise to which CITP provides them access through SLA membership. The ability to provide different skill sets within a fixed cost SLA provides an incredible advantage to departments, most of which have extremely diverse needs. Periods of high/excess demand or attrition are now buffered by the CITP group, rather than solely born by the individual department. Departments can switch from being reactive towards IT problems to proactively planning for future needs. In this environment IT becomes a transparent tool to support the department's mission, not a cumbersome obstacle to their core business function. Leave time becomes less problematic for IT staff and departments, as CITP maintains the clients' support needs even when the primary support staff member is out for vacation, sick leave, or training. IT support staff members experience the benefit of having increased opportunities in the CITP organization due to its scale. Scaling allows for specialization, and specialization provides these opportunities for growth. These opportunities decrease attrition, which of course reduces TCO for the department and the University. The scale of the group also provides increased

efficiencies in problem solving. As one member discovers a solution to a problem, she reports the findings to the group thereby shortening the overall learning curve of the group, which again increases the effectiveness and efficiency of CITP to the benefit of each participating client department. CITP has been carefully designed and implemented; however, the strength of the program comes from the very talented individuals who do a fantastic job of serving the client base every day.

In summary, CITP was designed to provide a scalable, cost recovery based IT unit which would retain the benefits of a central IT group under the CIO while allowing individual departments on campus to maintain control of their own IT needs, budgets, and priorities. CITP has met with overwhelming success in meeting these goals and will continue to grow and adapt to meet the changing IT needs of the University of Georgia.

Figure 1

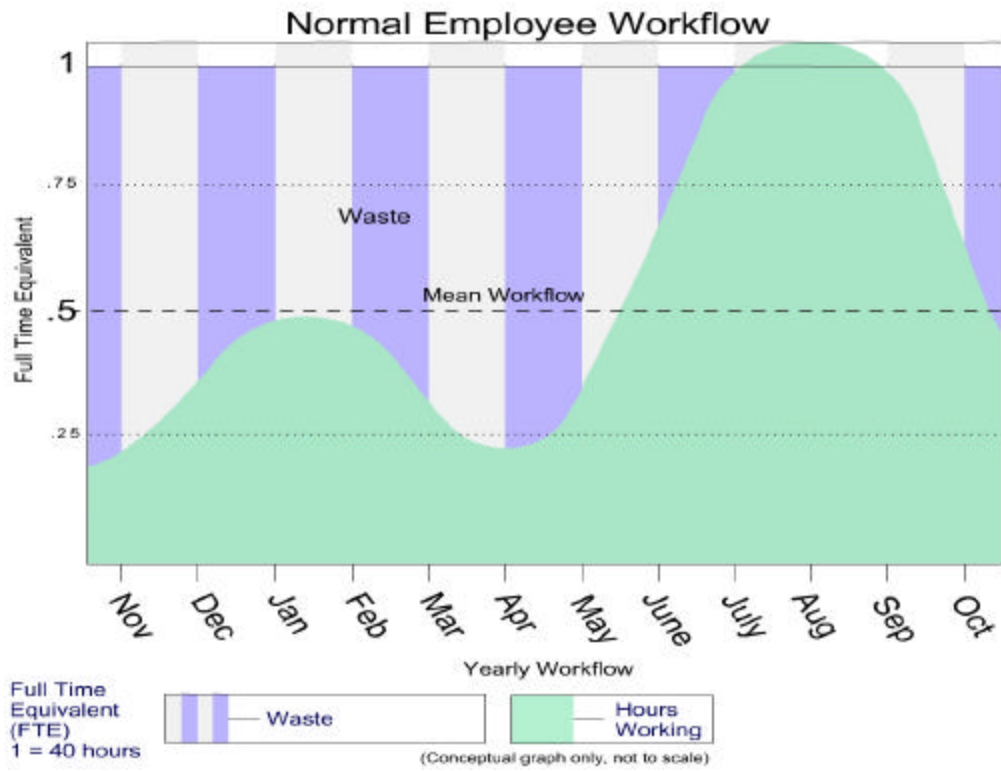


Figure 2

