June 21, 2010

Bill Fry, PhD
Dean of the Faculty
Cornell University

RE: request for annual report for activities of Faculty Advisory Board on Information Technology (FABIT)

Dean Fry:

Pursuant to your email request of 26 May, 2010, I am pleased to submit the following report of activities (summer 2009 → summer 2010) involving the Faculty Advisory Board on Information Technology (hereafter, FABIT), during the 2009-2010 academic year.

As you know, FABIT was created (approximately ~15 years ago) as a one-time advisory panel to consult on distribution of funds for an academic technology initiative, but subsequently evolved into a general ‘advisory board’ on information technology. FABIT provides CIT with a semi-formal forum in which to discuss issues (at various levels) with faculty representatives (FABIT meets monthly throughout the year). FABIT has no decision-making authority, but often drafts recommendations to university administration. FABIT members are encouraged to take topics back to home department for discussion. In effect, FABIT acts as a mechanism for exchange of ideas between CIT and associated agents, and the faculty at large. It is the only such mechanism in existence under current governance structures.

The following provides a brief summary of major issues considered by FABIT this past year:

> FABIT met several times (5) with Steve Schuster (Acting VP for Information Technology), to discuss pending and proposed changes to IT governance at Cornell. Major focus of these discussions concerned the most appropriate (and most useful) structures through which faculty could inform this process. The proposed changes to the CIT ‘service model’ (desktop support, central support and services) received considerable discussion. FABIT made several recommendations concerning the introduction, coordination and governance of IT services at Cornell. FABIT strongly supported these initiatives in general terms, and was pleased to see that the administration was seeking dialogue with faculty to make the proposed changes as seamless and effective as possible. We also met on 2 occasions with Jim Lombardi (CIT) who is managing the ‘Managed Desktop Initiative’ (wherein individual computers would be centrally managed - with a considerable saving in time and money), as one component of the new service model.
FABIT met on 3 occasions with (i) representatives from the Bain consultancy group (who have been hired by Cornell to develop proposals aimed at reimagining Cornell’s investment, planning and managing of IT in coming years), (ii) David Harris (Vice Provost) and Dan Huttenlocher (Dean of Computing and Information Science), and (iii) Tom Romantic (Director, Cornell Business Services) and Mike Winters (Manager of Procurement), to discuss policies (and implementation of same) concerning eShop, computer and related hardware acquisition at Cornell, and overall governance recommendations concerning faculty spend on IT.

While faculty appreciated the opportunity to engage with all 3 groups concerning these issues (which are part of the overall analysis of the current IT budget models), we came away somewhat unsatisfied with the end result. In particular, there seemed to be little clarity concerning policy - in particular, whether it was the centralized procurement and business office, or the College-level business centers, who were interpreting and enforcing (and in some cases, ‘inventing’ on a local level) IT procurement policy. There seemed to the members of FABIT a very real disconnect between the policy makers (at all levels) and faculty interests and practices concerning IT. While it was strongly suggested to the Bain consultants that faculty IT considerations be treated as distinct and separate from the rest of the University, we were somewhat unconvinced that this message would either be reflected in their report to the Provost, or if the Provost would be in a position to accept such a recommendation. What was particularly troublesome to most the members of FABIT was that new ‘sole source’ purchasing agreement. The basis for said agreement - as explained by Romantic and Winters - is that there are significant savings on the processing end, due to lower administrative costs for handling orders from preferred vendors. The policy implies that these savings outweigh the increases in realized cost to the parties (say, faculty) purchasing the equipment. If that were true, then the University should be able to hold the payer harmless and still come out ahead. Faculty would like to see something like that, or at least a sharing in the savings. The current (tentative?) model imposes higher costs on the faculty (or other entity purchasing the equipment) while retaining the savings centrally. FABIT remains very concerned about the lack of clarity in the policy, and the apparent failure (based on evidence to date) of the administration to consider the challenges and potential burdens imposed by the new ‘business model’ (although FABIT acknowledges that there is some uncertainty concerning final recommendation pending the final report from Bain).

FABIT engaged in lengthy discussions with Clare van den Blink (CIT) concerning BlackBoard and other course management systems (CMS). Such CMS applications are increasingly ‘mission critical’ for our faculty. To a large degree, CIT is faced with the near-impossible task of making significant investments in a CMS system (currently, BlackBoard is the supported enterprise solution at Cornell), while remaining flexible enough to both evaluate and (potentially) implement alternative CMS solutions. We noted that BlackBoard currently receives a higher CIT personnel allocation than any other service besides electronic mail and calendaring. The larger issue of the trade-off between current investment and flexibility for the future is endemic to such enterprise solutions, and FABIT acknowledges that the challenges of finding the
appropriate ‘balance’ will (and increasingly are) exacerbated by budget impacts on CIT capabilities. We urge the University to acknowledge the critical role of IT in the various missions of the University, and invest accordingly.

Following a 2-3 year sustained effort on the part of FABIT, the issue of application of compute technology to mitigate plagiarism among our students was approved by the EPC (Educational Policy Committee) for consideration by the Faculty Senate. This initiative began with discussions within FABIT, and quickly expanded to involve administration representatives from the offices for policy and counsel. FABIT was pleased to see the EPC accept the importance of, and assume leadership on, this issue. FABIT reiterated its willingness to facilitate and assist in this new initiative, as needed. As a related issue, FABIT met with Tracy Mitrano (Director of IT Policy) to consider language and policy related to plagiarism, copyright, and privacy. In particular, we discussed issues related to policy concerning ‘storage’ of electronic materials by 3rd parties (e.g., term papers by companies using them as a back-end database to test for evidence of plagiarism, storage of data and administrative e.mail in the ‘cloud’).

FABIT remained actively involved in the consideration of and evaluation of new pedagogical advances in the use of IT at Cornell - in serving the research, teaching, and extension outreach objectives of the university. For example, FABIT plays an integral role in evaluating multidisciplinary proposals submitted to the Faculty Innovation in Teaching (FIT) award program, coordinated by CIT. The FIT program facilitates and funds partnerships between faculty and CIT in developing cutting-edge IT-based application is improve and extend our capacities in teaching and extension outreach. FABIT also provided feedback on several presentations about the increasing application of ‘social networking’ paradigms in an instructional context.

Summary

FABIT currently is the only established mechanism which facilities direct dialogue between CIT (and associated units) and faculty concerning the development, management, and use of IT at Cornell. While its origin’s were arguably ad hoc, there is clearly a useful function served by FABIT - one which we believe might be enhanced by a reimaged governance structure that either (i) recast’s FABIT in a new role more consistent with developing governance initiatives, or (ii) dissolves FABIT as a stand-alone entity, while reinvesting and partitioning it’s aims and intents among new governance structures. As long-standing member and current Chair of FABIT, I personally prefer the former, since I think the ‘critical mass’ represented by faculty representation to FABIT is potentially a more efficient and effective vehicle for dialogue - partitioning the current FABIT structure among new governance structures would likely dilute some of this discourse, and would not transmit the thoughts and views of ‘rank and file’ faculty as effectively as the current FABIT structure allows. One change I would propose, however, is that FABIT (as a continuing body) be given regular access to members of the new governance structures.
We looked forward to discussions regarding the future role for FABIT.

Evan Cooch
Chair, FABIT