

Mobile Computing | Feature

Why Your Campus Needs a Mobile Users Group

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In an era of instant communication, it's ironic that faculty and staff at major universities often struggle to share their discoveries and knowledge with colleagues on campus. It's doubly ironic when those discoveries involve mobile devices. Yet that's exactly what's happening in the siloed world of higher education.

"We have an extremely decentralized university," noted Chase Masters, an instructional technology consultant who provides support services for faculty and staff in the College of Literature, Science & Arts at the [University of Michigan](#). "As far as mobile technology is concerned, we didn't know what was happening anywhere else on campus."

Conversations with other support staff at U-M confirmed that they felt the same sense of isolation. So Masters and another instructional technologist, Lauren Atkins Budde, decided to form the U-M Mobile Users Group.

The idea for the user group first arose in 2010, after the release of the first iPad. "We had a few meetings with faculty interested in getting their own iPads," recalled Masters. "We met informally a couple of times to talk about this new device, how to use it, and what it meant."

Platform Agnostic

But the iPad is just the tip of a burgeoning presence for mobile devices on campus. Plus, Masters and Budde were not interested in a user group that was narrowly focused on a single operating system. "What makes this group unique is that it's not an Android or iOS group," explained Masters. "It's a shared meeting ground for all users of any mobile OS or device. We try to create an environment of shared knowledge and equity between platforms."

Chase Masters and Lauren Budde will be presenting "When Mobile Learners Are the Teachers: Creating the University of Michigan Mobile Users Group" at [Campus Technology 2013](#), July 29-August 1 in Boston.

The group is open to faculty and staff from "all over" the university. A core group of approximately 100 "mobile enthusiasts" meets once a month in person to discuss a wide variety of mobile issues. The agenda for the most recent meeting, for example, included a roundtable discussion of [CamFind](#), [FocusTwist](#), [Yahoo!Weather](#), and [Pebble SDK](#), a Bluetooth-enabled smartwatch.

In addition, the group holds workshops on the basic use of mobile devices and mobile apps for education. Workshops conducted by group members have included mobile scavenger hunts,

augmented reality games, how to give a presentation using mobile devices, and creating apps and mobile sites.

"Typically, about one-third of the attendees join us virtually via Google Hangout," noted Masters. Budde and Masters usually lead the meetings, which always begin with open announcements and end with a roundtable discussion of the latest apps, events, news, and resources.

Between meetings, users interact through an active online community, which includes a [collaborative website](#), [Google+ Community](#), and their [MCommunity](#) e-mail group. Because users have their own personal areas of interest, the group has developed targeted e-mail lists to cover specific topics.

On the website, users have access to a large database of apps and resources. "There are probably more than 200 apps represented in the database," said Masters, adding that the website also sometimes airs mobile-related webinars.

Getting the Word Out

Working within a large, decentralized university was--and continues to be--the biggest challenge facing the group. "The meetings are advertised mostly via word of mouth," explained Masters. Currently, 30 departments are represented in the user group, with most participants coming from the ranks of the staff. Among these staff members, roughly 90 percent are directly involved with faculty support. "Overall, this is a small fraction of the 41,860 U-M community members," conceded Masters, "but we are growing."

At the same time, Masters recognizes that the user group is not a popularity contest. The aim is to connect staff and faculty who share a desire to improve teaching and learning with mobile technology. "We have a dedicated core group, as well as a large general e-mail list, making it really easy to find and share information across departments and schools," he said. "That was our goal."

On occasion, members also share physical resources, such as devices, cables, or physical attachments for testing or experimentation. "A great example of this is a mobile microscope that can be connected to an iOS device," noted Masters. "It's a tool owned by Instructional Support Services, but we loan it on occasion to other departments to test and try out."

How to Start

Although U-M is very decentralized, the school does have a culture of partnership. "We've been lucky in that the environment at the University of Michigan is really open to collaboration between groups and departments," said Masters. For schools looking to launch their own user groups on their campuses, a similar willingness to cross the departmental divide is essential.

Equally important, though, is finding a spark plug who can ignite the whole process. "It starts with someone who has a genuine interest in mobile technology and its application in higher education, as well as a desire to work with other units doing similar things," said Masters. "A willingness to experiment and a sense of organization are key!"

And don't expect to receive much in the way of funding. The user group at U-M certainly doesn't. "We utilize resources made available by some of the represented departments, and many of us spend personal funds on the devices and apps simply because of our passion and interest in the field," said Masters.

In lieu of funding, prospective user groups might be better off pursuing a space to call their own. "You need a space in which you can flourish," Masters commented, adding that he wishes the U-M group had found a better meeting location sooner in its development. The group originally met at a local coffeehouse, but it now has a "larger, quieter, undisturbed" meeting space in the Shapiro Undergraduate Library, with reliable WiFi service that allows it to broadcast meetings to other members via G+ Hangout and live streaming.

About the Author

Toni Fuhrman is a writer and creative consultant based in Los Angeles.

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