

## **White Paper: Recommendation to Form an Information Technology Committee**

October 8, 2002

This White Paper has been written in response to the PLC Executive Committee's request for additional information about the Communications and Information Technology (C/IT) Committee's recommendation that a new Information Technology Committee be formed comprising the Information Technology members of the current C/IT Committee. The goal of this document is to outline the rationale and substantive reasoning for recommending formation of this new committee. This paper is the collaborative work of several members of the C/IT committee, including both Communications and IT program leaders.

### **C/IT: Same Mission, Different Objectives**

Communications and Information Technology are equally important to the Extension's mission. As part of the CES support structure, they add value to programs, provide infrastructures that allow for collaboration and communication, and support effective program delivery. Their programs are highly integrated with one another and with other programs. Common to both programs is the objective of providing service to internal customers. Yet Communications and IT professionals have fundamentally separate goals and objectives. For example, typical responsibilities for the Communications group include:

- designing, developing, and implementing programs to market the Extension Service and its programs;
- preparing and disseminating educational information through a variety of media, including publications, newspapers, broadcast media, and the Internet;
- producing television programs, radio programs, and audio and video segments;
- advising on communication strategies and assisting with external relations issues;
- collecting, packaging, and disseminating accountability information;
- establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the mass media;
- evaluating the effectiveness of information and marketing programs;
- providing responsive, economical support services such as photography, graphic design, printing, warehousing, and distribution to Extension personnel;
- conducting training on communication skills for Extension specialists and field faculty.

IT groups typically focus on a quite different set of responsibilities:

- providing and maintaining internet connectivity to the county offices;
- ensuring virus protection for computer workstations and servers;
- specifying, installing, and maintaining network appliances and web servers;
- ensuring the reliable flow of email;
- providing guidance and advice on computer and technology purchases;
- training faculty and staff in use of IT applications and web page development,;
- implementing and maintaining a digital diagnostics program;
- developing and maintaining organizational software applications; and
- installing and protecting wireless connections.

The substantial differences in mission and responsibilities of communications and IT units is evidenced by the fact that the majority of participating institutions within the Southern Region have separate Communications and IT groups each with its own state leader. These separate groups should each be represented by its own program leaders at the PLC table who can adequately address the group's needs, interests, and perspectives.

## **Representation**

A committee's PLC representative provides an official communications channel to the PLC for program leaders from the participating institutions. In 1997, Information Technology program leaders were invited by Communications Committee members to participate in the PLC meetings. From this first meeting, IT leaders have enjoyed the benefits that are part of the PLC: greater understanding and appreciation of Cooperative Extension Service mission and goals, participation in collaborative projects within and among committees and institutions, and interpersonal interaction through face-to-face meetings.

Yet, the existing structure does not allow for full, adequate, and complete representation by Communications and IT members. Communications and IT are two distinctly different "disciplines". Each of these disciplines brings unique capabilities, interest, and viewpoints to the PLC table. No single person can fully speak to the issues of both the communications and IT professions. One person cannot represent the interests of both IT and Communications within the current committee meeting format.

Since 1997, the two groups within the C/IT Committee have sought balanced representation by alternating officers and PLC representatives among 1862 and 1890 institutions and among Communication heads and Information Technology heads. Because of the combined committee and under the existing protocol, Communications program leaders do not have the assurance of both an 1890 and 1862 representative; similarly, IT program leaders also lack this assurance. Currently, PLC representatives for C/IT will either be a combination of Communications or IT leaders, where one representative is from Communications and one representative is from IT, or both representatives will come from one program area either Communications or IT. In the latter case, the representatives are almost certain to lack a complete understanding of the other program area's unique issues and capabilities. The combined committee provides a disproportionate voice as decisions are made at the Executive Committee level. The formation of an IT committee will alleviate this situation and allow for full participation by both Communications and IT in the important decision making process.

## **Meeting**

As program leaders, we recognize, understand, and accept the critical need to work together in order to provide truly good solutions. The advent of the CECP project makes true collaboration even more important. Currently, the C/IT committee meets as one group to discuss issues, concerns, and projects in common to the two programs, then breaks into two sub-committees for state reports and to discuss those issues, concerns, and projects that are more closely aligned with the particular program area. In some cases, various sub-groups from within a program area will join discussions with other committees when there are potential collaborative projects. This framework and scheduling has worked well enough for communications between the two groups.

With the formation of a new IT committee, the two would expect to continue to schedule time to hold joint meetings. To address issues, such as CECP, where there are joint activities and in which Communications and IT play a significant role, the newly formed IT and Communications committees will be determined to continue scheduled interaction, both in face-to-face meetings at the annual conference and in other communication channels. C/IT members are committed to internal processes that continue the cooperation and teamwork between the groups. As an

example of a strategy that might be enacted to continue interaction between the separate committees at the annual conference, the following schedule could be used:

- Session 1: Each committee meets separately to review action items from the previous year, receive any last minute updates, and address emerging issues.
- Session 2: The committees then meet jointly and each committee chair provides a summary report on Session 1.
- Session 3: Each committee meets separately to continue discussions and the development of its action items.
- Session 4: The committees meet jointly and each committee chair provides a report on its planned action items.
- Session 5: Each committee meets separately to continue discussions and if needed develop a response to the other committees action items.
- After this final meeting the committee chairs exchange responses on action items.

Again, this is an example of a schedule that formalizes a working relationship wherein time is allotted for interaction and collaboration between the two committees. Whether C/IT stays together or separates, this approach is an example of a prescribed mechanism for collaboration and for a checks-and-balances approach to the decision making process.

Decisions made and directives given without adequate input can negatively impact projects, both under design and in implementation. Conversely, committees who want to work together will do so, regardless of how they are organized, and they usually find a way to collaborate if each values what the other brings to the process. C/IT members have expressed a sense of accomplishment and value over those projects which have been developed through collaboration and cooperation. They will work through the scheduling process to maintain this relationship.

### **Committee Member Participation**

Participation by 1890's institutions at the annual meetings continues to be a struggle for the Communications and IT Committee. Evaluation of rosters from the past few years shows other committees also confront this same issue. The PLC structure offers invaluable opportunities and immeasurable benefits. It is imperative that these opportunities and benefits are conveyed to program leaders at sister institutions in an effort to trigger participation at the annual meeting. Realizing that lean budget years may impact participation, low-cost communication channels such as listservs, broadcast email messages, and videoconferences can keep interested program leaders abreast of important decisions.

Participation by program leaders should be a campaign that is not exclusive to Communications and IT, but for the entire PLC. Realizing that participation will have a direct cost in terms of travel expenses, time, and energy, these costs should be viewed as an investment with potential dividends. Since the first invitation to attend, the IT leaders have consistently attended the conference with their Communications colleagues. With the exception of encouraging increased 1890 participation, the separation of C/IT into two committees will not increase costs to the states represented. The Communications Committee and a newly formed IT Committee will both work with other committees to explore opportunities that invite full participation and, in turn, increase the potential for a very high return-on-investment.

## Summary

A list of the benefits and costs associated with the separation of C/IT into the individual program areas are highlighted as follows:

### Advantages

- Both Communications and IT would have equal representation to more effectively carry out PLC objectives.
- The smaller sizes of the separate committees would increase efficiency and the ability to get the needed work done during the conference.
- The separated groups could provide more focused leadership to the CECP and e-Extension projects by concentrating on the areas each does best.
- As with other program committees, the time spent meeting jointly would be targeted to specific projects in which both committees collaborate.

### Disadvantages

- 1890 universities will be underrepresented on the IT committee. To address this, the members will commit to encourage participation by their 1890 colleagues.
- The PLC's primary agenda (e.g., CECP) involves joint activities in which both Information Technology and communications play a significant role and in which they are closely linked. To address this issue, the newly formed IT and Communications committees will commit to regularly meet and discuss issues of mutual concern.
- The C/IT Committee recognizes that the proliferation of committees to support disciplinary and special interests seems counter to the purpose of the PLC. Yet, Communications and Information Technology are separate disciplines, have separate goals and objectives, and are, in many cases, organizationally different.

The PLC's mission and goals will be advanced with the formation of a new IT committee through full and adequate representation and increased collaboration and participation. The return on these investments will be realized both in the short term and in the years to come.

## **Appendix A.**

### **Historical Background of the Recommendation**

Communications and Information Technology serve equally important roles in Extension's mission. Their programs are integrated with each other, as well as with other program areas. Yet, the fundamentally different goals and objectives between Communications and IT provide direction for their dissimilar projects. Because of this, equal time is spent between a joint committee meeting and separate Communications and IT sub-committee meetings at the annual PLC conference. This time in separate sub-committee meetings allows for focused discussion on individual projects where there is very little overlap between Communications and IT. Additionally, due to the size of the C/IT Committee, breaking out into sub-committees allows for increased interaction by participating members.

In the past, the committee has discussed the possible need for two committees that would, potentially, alleviate some of these problems. However, no concerted or orchestrated effort was put forth that would bring this discussion to the table. On the second day of this year's conference, the IT sub-committee discussed a request by committee members regarding the perceived need to form a separate IT Committee. This discussion was overshadowed by other business including state reports, e-Extension, and the CECF project. The consensus was to take the issue forward to the C/IT Committee for open discussion.

### **Voting Procedure**

The last day of the annual conference is customarily used to finish unprocessed business, and summarize goals and objectives, including action and informational items to be sent to the PLC. These discussions are an important part of the conference. It is the committee member's decision to attend this last day and it is unfortunate that some of the C/IT members elect to not participate in the last day of the conference. Yet, the committee's decision to forward action items should not be called into question due to the absence of committee members.

On the final day of this year's conference, the action item was proposed to the committee by the IT sub-committee. The discussion was free-flowing and no time limit was placed upon the length of discussion. The issue was discussed to a natural conclusion. The vote, taken by ballot, showed that a clear majority was in favor of sending the action item forward to the PLC.