

## **Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age**

A Symposium at Millsaps College, September 20-21, 2002

Millsaps College in the spring of 2002 applied for a grant from the Associated Colleges of the South under the Information Fluency Project of ACS, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. One of the strengths of the ACS information fluency initiative has been the recognition that how an institution addresses information fluency is a complex issue and not one which can use a template approach. Each institution must determine for itself what information fluency means and what role information fluency should play in the institution. In the case of Millsaps, the planning group which developed the proposal to ACS recognized the shared belief that Millsaps College must achieve an appropriate balance between the traditional role and values of the residential liberal arts college and the evolving role of technology.

The planning group recognized that traditional problem-solving methods must be expanded to adequately prepare students for solving problems by means of current and emerging computational processes and technologies. And, both faculty and students must be integrally involved in defining, refining, and disseminating such new problem-solving methods and techniques. The group recognized that faculty (and consequently students) have not embraced the information fluency concept enthusiastically as of yet. Our thinking was that this is largely a result of faculty failing to understand what information fluency means, the importance of the concept, and what it represents as a teaching opportunity and challenge.

The group felt that the most effective approach for initiating a broad-based dialogue about information fluency on the campus was to hold a faculty conference early in the fall semester of 2002-2003. The plan was to identify an outside person with faculty recognition and an understanding of information fluency who could articulate this to the faculty in a way that would help them to understand the reason for the importance and desirability of infusing this into the curriculum/culture. The goal of the conference was for participants to understand "what is information fluency", "should this be important at Millsaps", "how might we approach information fluency", and "how do we help students achieve information fluency". The original proposal to ACS, "Information Fluency: Where Are We and Where Should We Go?", is included as IF\_proposal\_2002\_1\_submitted.pdf with the documents accompanying this report.

The ACS Information Fluency Coordinating Committee was willing to approve the Millsaps proposal, subject to reduced funding which was half of what was requested in the original proposal. The Millsaps planning group was concerned that a viable symposium could not be conducted for this amount. However, Dean Richard Smith acknowledged the importance of the proposed symposium and was willing for Millsaps to provide additional funding to make the event possible. In the end, Millsaps provided approximately \$3000 to supplement the \$7000 grant approved by ACS.

Shortly after the grant request was approved in late May, 2002, Dr. Kenneth Abernethy from Furman University accepted the invitation to be the speaker for the symposium. Dr. Abernethy's involvement in the ACS information fluency initiative from its inception, his continuing participation in the ACS efforts in this area, and his broad-based knowledge in technology and computing in the liberal arts environment made him an ideal choice to lead the symposium. The planning group moved ahead to develop the program using group conference calls including Dr. Abernethy. A date early in the academic year was important, before the

“crush” of responsibilities of the semester set in on everyone. As might be expected, finding a date that was early, when facilities were available, and when the speaker could come was not easy but finally a date was determined: Friday-Saturday, September 20-21, 2002.

The first general announcement about the symposium was given at the fall faculty conference on Friday, August 23. This was followed a week later by a reminder from Dean Richard Smith. During this period, the planning group continued work on the symposium program and Tom Henderson and Larry Madison developed a Web page as the focal point for information. Members of the group talked to colleagues and encouraged participation. On Friday, September 6, an email message was sent to the faculty with details about the symposium and a link to the Web page with the detailed program:

To: Faculty

Subject: Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age

Millsaps will hold a symposium, Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age, on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, September 20-21.

Our keynote speaker for this event is Dr. Ken Abernethy, an ACS colleague from Furman University. Ken is uniquely qualified to guide our thinking in the role of technology in teaching and learning. He has been involved with ACS technology initiatives from the earliest days and has co-authored a textbook in fundamental digital technologies. He is an engaging speaker who will help us think our way through the issues.

The event is underwritten with an ACS grant funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Participants will receive a \$200 stipend - but you do need to register.

What we promise is no answers but lots of questions. But, we need you to help make this effort a success and to help the College as it looks to the future.

Details and information are at:

<http://library.millsaps.edu/library/IFSymposium/>

The planning group worked on the many logistical details for making the event happen and faculty began to register. After less than a week, there were 18 confirmed registrations. The planning group met on Thursday, September 6 to review logistical details and projected expenditures, to discuss evaluation of the planned event, and to make final assignments of items to be completed. Just to make sure no one overlooked the opportunity, another message was sent to faculty that afternoon:

To: Faculty

Subject: Maybe I Need to Consider This?

**Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age**

September 20-21

No HTML

No Dreamweaver

No Flash

No Perl Scripts

No Techno-Geeks

So, why should I be interested in the upcoming Millsaps Symposium? After all, my plate is way beyond full, into double-overflow. Do I really need to know about this?

The Symposium will address items such as:

What are the issues in technology for the liberal arts environment?

Is all of this going to go away?

Isn't technology only a tool?

What do I want to be able to do?

What should Millsaps be thinking about?

So, perhaps you need to be rethinking, "Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age".

What we promise is no answers but lots of questions. But, we need you to help make this event a success and to help the College as it looks to the future.

Details and information are at:

<http://library.millsaps.edu/library/IFSymposium/>

Tom Henderson will confirm each registration with a return email message.

Faculty who planned to participate were asked to comment on what they were already doing with technology. Among the answers received were:

Right now, I am tied to what is available to me: slides, vhs, some dvd, some power point (unless you have two projectors, power point isn't useful for art history where you need two images side by side)... I have trouble getting people to read email; I have trouble assigning web projects.

I'm interested in the subject for itself and think I should keep current on what the faculty is learning so I can tie it into other workshops I will be doing.

As a teacher of languages, I have been involved in many discussions about the incorporation of technology into language learning, the teaching of culture and the development of student projects through their writing their own web pages. I look forward to hearing from you and to attending the conference.

I'm interested in the use of new technologies to enhance our environmental studies and field programs. In particular, training in Global Information Systems and ArcView would be helpful for faculty so that we can use it in field research and incorporate it into our courses.

A final message was sent to faculty several days before the symposium and contained a provocative article written by an ACS colleague, Dr. Tom Lairson of Rollins College:

To: Faculty

Subject: Is Technology "Just a Tool"?

An ACS colleague, Tom Lairson of Rollins College, is writing a feature article for the forthcoming ACS on-line journal, Transformations: Liberal Arts in the Digital Age. His abstract for the article, Is Technology "Just a Tool"?, is an excellent thought piece for our faculty as we prepare for the upcoming Symposium, "Rethinking the Liberal Arts Experience in the Digital Age". I believe you will find this useful and thought provoking even if you are unable to attend the Symposium.

Tom agreed to write this abstract of his article for us and I am attaching it for you to read.

If you have not yet signed up for the Symposium, there is still time. More information and registration information is at:

<http://library.millsaps.edu/library/IFSymposium/>

The abstract of the Lairson article is included as techtoolsum.pdf with the documents included for this report.

The day before the Symposium, twenty-nine faculty representing thirteen departments had registered. A final email message with the Symposium schedule was sent to each registrant.

The Symposium was held as planned on September 20-21 with a total attendance of 30, including the speaker, Ken Abernethy. The schedule for the Symposium is included as Final\_schedule.pdf with the documents accompanying this report. On both days, participants were actively engaged in the discussions, both in the general sessions led by Ken Abernethy and in the breakout discussion groups. At the end of the Saturday session, participants were asked to complete an evaluation. Twenty-three of the twenty-nine participants turned in an evaluation. The evaluation instrument is included as Evaluation\_instrument.pdf with the documents accompanying this report.

As expected, Ken Abernethy was an engaging speaker and leader for the Symposium. A review of the evaluations shows that participants felt the event was very worthwhile. The questions at the end of the evaluation instrument are potentially very useful for future planning in the academic computing area. The complete summary of the evaluations is included as Evaluation\_results.pdf with the documents accompanying this report.

During the breakout sessions, each group used flip charts to record comments and ideas. The complete text of these flip charts was transcribed and sent to each participant. Because there was no formal specified structure for these notes, it is not always easy to fully understand the intent of some of the text. Nevertheless, the information contained in these notes is useful in understanding the content of the discussion and direction of the thinking in the small groups as they worked through the points addressed in the full sessions. These notes are included as RTLADA\_flip\_chart\_notes.pdf with the documents accompanying this report.

The question now becomes, what are the tangible and/or expected outcomes from the Symposium? First, there has been significant ongoing discussion by faculty participants. Such events always have a "binding factor", helping colleagues to understand that they are working together to understand concepts and issues and to do something about them. Second, several participants discussed the Global Information Systems (GIS) concepts during the Symposium and continued the discussion afterwards. A faculty member in biology took a lead role and applied for a grant from ACS to hold a GIS Symposium at Millsaps with assistance of colleagues from Rhodes College. ACS approved the grant request and the symposium will be held in early spring 2003. Finally, it is expected that the Academic Computing Advisory Committee will use information gathered and concerns expressed at the Symposium to assist them as they make recommendations for future planning for academic computing at the College as they develop an Information Technology Strategic Plan. Millsaps College believes that the ACS investment which made the Symposium possible will continue to provide benefits here. The College thanks ACS and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for making the Symposium possible.

Final expenses for the Symposium were:

Participant stipends and honorarium (includes the required FICA payment amounts)	8459.00
Speaker airfare and lodging	333.50
Speaker hospitality	132.29
Symposium reception	275.82
Symposium breakfast, lunch	504.90
Office supplies	204.73
Total expenses	\$ 9910.24

Included as associated documents for this report are:

original proposal	IF_proposal_2002_1_submitted.pdf
Lairson article	techtoolsum.pdf
symposium schedule	Final_schedule.pdf
evaluation instrument	Evaluation_instrument.pdf
evaluation results	Evaluation_results.pdf
transcription of flip charts	RTLADA_flip_chart_notes.pdf
symposium photos	1.jpg through 19.jpg