

August 28, 2015

Greetings!

In what I intend to make into a monthly open letter, I wanted to take a little time this month to introduce myself and my role at Vanderbilt. The position of Associate Provost for Digital Learning was designed to head up initiatives under the “Educational Technology” leg of Vanderbilt’s Academic Strategic Plan. Indeed, part of the reason for the creation of this position is that Vanderbilt, under the leadership of Chancellor Nicholas Zeppos, Provost Susan Wentz, and, most directly, the guidance of Vice Provost Cynthia Cyrus, has so many growing initiatives, that it was prudent to name someone to make the cross fertilization of Vanderbilt’s many resources a sole priority.

A recent faculty survey at Vanderbilt illustrated that the vast majority of faculty have a strong interest in working with digital technologies as a way to improve their teaching. Simultaneously, however, faculty are largely unaware of our resources and where to find them. This is a problem that we can solve rather easily by both publicizing Vanderbilt’s current digital resources and modeling them to fit the evolving needs of our community.

In my position, I will be working to coordinate and bring attention to a number of existing and highly successful initiatives, such as the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, Tracking the resources of the Central Library, the Center for Teaching (CFT), the Curb Center, Vanderbilt Student Communications, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, and Vanderbilt University Information Technology (VUIT), I want to encourage the productive use of technology in “learning” (including residential teaching, MOOCs, research and the expression of research). I also hope to foster frequent and open dialogue about the evolving digital needs of the Vanderbilt community, and will work with faculty, students, staff, and campus partners to identify opportunities where digital technologies can facilitate learning.

While digital learning clearly encompasses MOOCs and our work with Coursera, this is only a fraction of what I hope to see taking place at Vanderbilt. Indeed, we are asking faculty to think about altering or rethinking how they pursue and create knowledge with our digitally-imbedded students. This could mean the implementation of particular “digital tools,” (e.g., blogs, podcasts, the wide variety of social media platforms) or it could mean data mining or the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to provide different ways of understanding history. In other words, digital tools can alter the way we think about the world, how we communicate this knowledge to one another in a classroom environment, and how we communicate and collaborate with those well beyond the borders of our campus.

While I don’t want to sound pollyannaish, if we are able to capture and leverage the wisdom on campus with the resources we have in place across Vanderbilt and within individual departments, I feel confident that as we state in our Strategic Plan, we will become a leader in the employment of digital technologies in ways that we cannot yet imagine. To that end, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly at john.m.sloop@vanderbilt.edu with suggestions and ideas to elevate digital learning at Vanderbilt.

I look forward to working with all of you and invite your thoughts and questions.

Sincerely,

