

# IT at UTEP: Observations and Recommendations

Faculty Senate Information Technology Committee, Spring 2009

## 1. Aims and Scope of this Report

The IT committee of the Faculty Senate has two charges: to "a. recommend policies pertaining to University, Faculty and Student needs in information technology; b. provide liaison among Faculty, Students and Administration concerning information technology" (Faculty Senate document, section 9.5.5.2). This year it was felt that (again) the primary way for the sub-committee to make a contribution would be to analyze the current state to which information technology at UTEP is meeting the needs of the stakeholders, and recommend ways to improve it. In particular, this year we also looked at how *student* needs are being met. We also chose to look at information technology holistically across campus (not just the central Information Technology organization).

This report describes the activities of the committee, documents the findings, and makes 11 recommendations for how to improve information technology at UTEP.

## 2. Information Gathering Activities

### 2.1 Interviews and Meetings

Various members of the committee interviewed key figures in information technology, including Steve Riter, VP of Information Resources and Planning, Frank Poblano, Assistant IT Director for Technology Implementation, Lizette Gameros, Helpdesk coordinator, and Melanie Thomas, IT Manager of Marketing and Communications. In particular, Virgilio Gonzalez explored what could be learned from the calls that come in to the Helpdesk. From the providers' point of view, the main dissatisfaction with the Helpdesk is the inability to provide help for all problems: for example if a student can't connect to the wireless network, then he can be helped, but if he has viruses on his machine, that's beyond the scope of what the Helpdesk can do. Virgilio reported that most helpdesk requests fall into two categories: maintenance (e.g. printer down) and new services (e.g. need a telephone installed).

CIERP and VPBA are developing a Student Satisfaction Survey for administrative units across the campus, including IT. The surveys are designed for students and will be launched in April during Survey Week. These surveys seem to be designed to gauge the general satisfaction with the various types of services. This is useful for establishing a baseline for cross-year comparisons, and finding evidence for specific hypotheses; but not so much for identifying specific issues or unaddressed needs.

The Information Technology (IT) department undergoes a strategic planning exercise every 3-4 years with the goal of laying out a roadmap for technology implementations and directions campus-wide. At this point, 2006-2009 Strategic Plan is coming to a close, and a Technology Strategic Plan for 2010-2012 is apparently being formulated. These documents include discussions of new technology and IT development priorities, in addition to comments on customer needs.

## **2.2 Examination of previous reports**

In Fall of 2006 the TIMs, working on behalf of the Committee, solicited by emails to the faculty and staff of each college whatever they considered to be "issues" for IT at UTEP. The raw comments were distilled into a list of 11 service categories, with 3-5 issues identified for each. No priorities were assigned. Some of the issues identified have since been solved; others remain.

CIERP kindly provided the committee with survey results pertaining to information technology from three sources: the Spring 2007 Campus Experience Surveys, the 2007-2008 Graduating Senior Survey, and the Fall 2007 New Student Survey. The results were generally at a level of abstraction too high for our purposes; for example knowing that 87% of the undergraduates were satisfied or very satisfied with "computer facilities" was not adequate for inferring what specific areas need attention.

## **2.3 Listening**

John Wiebe, Faculty Senate President, observed that some faculty have complained about information overload, specifically being inundated with email. Other faculty concerns were also heard and discussed.

## **2.4 Surveys**

After extensive discussion of possible ways to do a survey, discussion, the Committee decided on a very simple format, with the aim of identifying what's important to the users.

The opinions of about 200 faculty and 100 staff were solicited by email. This reached those with last names starting with A, B, and part of C. We had about 51 responses; a 17% response rate. Similarly about 700 students were contacted. By oversight, those listing non-miners address (@hotmail, @gmail etc.) were not contacted. A fair number of the emails immediately bounced. There were about 22 responses, a 3% response rate.

As the raw data is rather overwhelming, the following method, provided by CIERP, was used to identify recurring themes. All responses were reviewed several times, after which categories of responses were identified. Efforts were made to develop a category for any responses to a question that appeared at least twice. Responses that appeared only once but were closely related to another response were also included. Grouping variables were then identified. Grouping variables describe general categories that emerged as themes in the responses, such as "Services" (e.g., email, software, Internet speed etc.) that can be distinguished from other groups of responses related to "Customer Service" or "Staff". In some cases, a response from one

individual might be categorized twice (for example, the respondent identifies staff and services on a question about the "best things about IT"). This method was followed fairly strictly for the faculty-staff survey (analysis by CIERP), and more loosely for the student survey.

The questions, raw responses, and recurring themes are shown in appendices B and C.

## **2.5 Focus Groups**

In order to better understand some of the comments on the surveys, to get a sense for what problems are most important, and to solicit further comments, two focus groups were done, one with faculty-staff and one with students. Both focus groups run by the same 3 people, one moderating and two taking (non-verbatim) notes.

Appendices D and E describe the procedure and the questions used, and give the results.

## **3. Recommendations**

This section presents the committee's recommendations for how to improve information technology at UTEP.

We must note that these are not the only things that could be improved — the raw opinions in the appendices are full of things that could be addressed. However the committee feels that these issues are the most important ones.

We must also note that, by and large, information technology at UTEP is not in bad shape. The surveys and focus groups revealed a fair level of satisfaction overall, with many specific positive comments.

### **3.1 Action Items**

In order of importance:

#### **1. UTEP should provide training for students in the technology they need to use succeed in their studies and after graduation.**

Specifics: The need seems strongest for WebCT, but also exists for Goldmine and possibly mspace; and for special-interest software (e.g. iMovie). Currently students are left to sink or swim. Those who are good with technology or like learning on their own are happy with this; but others are not. Obviously most students manage to pick up the basics and get by, but many feel that they are unable to get the full benefit of what's available. As the University moves towards more remote and technology-enhanced courses, the needs here are likely to grow. Ideally, students should be capable enough with the technology to use it not just as specifically required, but to adapt it to their own needs, suitably combining and adapting the tools available to set up digital environments to support their own learning, including for group-based activities.

Current situation: Currently it seems that UTEP offers no training in technology for students.

Who's responsible: There is no department or organization responsible for this; this seems to have fallen between the cracks.

Implementation Thoughts: Training could perhaps be done as part of Univ 1301 and/or freshman orientation. Free-standing orientation and training sessions, perhaps of the type offered by the library, are another option. Better documentation of the software systems to make it easier for students to learn themselves is also worth considering.

Evidence: On the FSIT student survey, training was among the items mentioned most frequently as needing to be improved "over the next few years" (after more and newer hardware). In the Campus Experience Survey (Undergraduates, Spring 2007), some 30% obtained little or no benefit from being at UTEP in terms of "Have your knowledge and skills been enhanced in the following areas as a result of your UTEP education?" (B.h) (only 78% responded yes, and of those in the follow up question "how much has your UTEP experience enhanced ...", 8% responded "very little"). In the student focus group, training was a recurring theme, and there was a strong consensus that this was necessary and important, e.g. "it makes a difference to be knowing all the software but it's hard to keep up," "will have a head start in the workplace if you already know the new technologies," and "must be cutting edge so you are ready for the working world, so you're prepared for any job; if you're not up-to-date then you're out of the game when looking for employment ... "

## **2. UTEP should ensure that hardware is regularly updated.**

A. Laboratory PCs: One of the most frequent topics mentioned on the student surveys was the need for more (or more available) PCs and newer/faster PCs.

B. Classroom Technology: Both students and faculty included classroom technology in the top 3 "worst things". The number of complaints was not high (3 faculty members, 2 students), so this is probably not a pervasive problem. However, but the committee feels that having functioning technology in the classrooms is essential to the University's mission, and that this must be a priority.

C. Other PCs: In the faculty-staff survey, updates to technology were one of the most common topics, and many of the specific comments referred to desktop PCs and laptops.

The administration should allocate funding sufficient to support replacement of old PCs and repair of broken classroom systems. The Information Technology organization should monitor the projection systems etc. in the classrooms and make sure that problems are fixed quickly.

## **3. UTEP should offer training for faculty and staff in the technology they need.**

On the faculty survey, the most common topic of suggestions for immediate improvement was for more workshops, tutorials, and training. While there is Faculty and Staff Training at UTEP, including on Microsoft Word through PACE and also training in BIS and Banner, it seems that

these offerings to not meet the needs. From the focus groups and surveys it seems that some faculty and staff are unable to use Outlook to effectively manage their inboxes and their schedules; other inefficiencies are probably also present. The responsibility for such training is not clear; perhaps the information technology department should work with PACE to identify what sorts of training would be helpful and how it could be provided.

#### **4. Streamline the helpdesk voice menu that students face.**

Students who call the helpdesk with a problem have to listen to a 25-second "advertisement" about payment options before they can even get to the voice menu. Delays in getting service were a common complaint in the surveys, and in the student focus group there was clear consensus that this particular delay is gratuitous and should be removed.

#### **5. Increase IT staffing levels to reduce response time.**

The single most frequent item faculty and staff identified as a "worst" thing about information technology is slow response time. This was also a recurring comment on the student survey. Information Technology should quantify how long people are waiting to speak to a helpdesk representative and how long it takes to problems resolution; and if necessary, increase staffing levels to reduce these delays.

#### **6. Investigate the causes of the long time required for students to login to computers in the various labs.**

A number of students complained about slow PCs in the public laboratories, especially the time to log-in. Information Technology should measure the average log-in time, diagnose the problem, and make the necessary hardware, network, server, or client-configuration changes to speed-up logins.

#### **7. Extend helpdesk hours, ideally to 24/7.**

While this was mentioned by only 5 people on the surveys, there are clearly people who need help after-hours; distance-learning students being the obvious example. The Helpdesk should be staffed evenings and weekends.

#### **8. Improve the expertise of the technology-related staff, including student employees.**

The faculty-staff survey included many comments about the importance of training for the technical personnel to ensure that they are qualified to solve the problems and technically up-to-date. The student survey and the student focus group also raised this as an issue, especially for the student employees working as lab attendants. Qualified people should be hired, and existing staff should be given training sufficient to accomplish their job functions.

#### **9. Investigate ways to improve the printing situation for students.**

On the student surveys there were a number of comments about printers and printing, including broken printers, lack of information about the printing policy, and inability to easily purchase print credits. Information Technology should investigate the extent to which the printing hardware, software, policies, and policy dissemination are meeting student needs, and make changes if necessary.

## **3.2 General Recommendations**

### **1. Monitor customer service.**

To the UTEP community, customer service is very important: the topics most frequently commented on related to the quality of the interactions with the technology support staff. Perhaps surprisingly courtesy and respect were mentioned as often as competence and response time. Across the board there were more positive than negative comments. We recommend that management continue to monitor and strive to improve customer service.

### **2. Hire a customer advocate.**

It does not appear that the various information technology organizations at UTEP have a good way of gauging whether their activities are really meeting students' needs. To some extent the activities of the Faculty Senate IT committee this year were able to provide such information, but ideally the monitoring of users' needs and satisfaction levels should be done routinely as a normal function of the organization. Because UTEP students tend to suffer rather than complain, student voices are not always heard; and those issues that do garner attention may not be the most important ones.

UTEP should hire one or more people to take a "customer advocate" role, including a quality assurance role (testing software and systems adequacy from the viewpoint of the students/customers), a user-experience design role, a customer satisfaction monitoring role, and possibly an ombudsman role.

Of course, the activities of such a person need not be limited to information technology issues. Everyone knows stories of students who have stopped out or dropped out because of some technical or bureaucratic glitch that should never have happened. Often policies and procedures are designed without full consideration of their effects for the students. An ombudsman with the authority to diagnose such mission-critical problems and fix things across organizational boundaries could be a great asset for UTEP.

## **3.3 Recommendations for Future FSIT Committees**

1. Follow through on what happened with this year's topics. In the first instance, request reports from those to whom the action items were addressed.

2. Encourage implementation of the management recommendations above, perhaps by requesting reports from the service-providing organizations, probably specifying in some detail what information is being requested and how it should be gathered.

3. Continue to work with everyone across campus interested in measuring and improving information technology services at UTEP.
4. Possibly examine some specific problems, perhaps by taking as case studies one or two of the occasional spectacular blow-ups in information technology services, or a few random calls to the Helpdesk, and forming a sub-committee (a commission of inquiry) to track down the superficial and root causes of the problem, and recommend changes to reduce the likelihood of future occurrences.
5. Repeat the survey and focus group activities, probably every 2 years,
6. If a customer service advocate is hired, support and guide that person.

## **Committee Members**

### **College Representatives**

Brian Giza, Teacher Education, representing Education  
Mickey Manciu, Physics, representing Science  
Paulo Pinheiro da Silva, Computer Science, representing Engineering,  
Karl Putnam, Accounting, representing Business  
Darla Smith, Kinesiology, representing Health Sciences  
Bob Wren, Humanities, representing Liberal Arts,

### **At Large**

Virgilio Gonzalez, Electrical and Computer Engineering, at large, *Vice Chair*  
Nigel Ward, Computer Science, at large, *Chair*

### **Ex Officio**

Mary Duffy, Head, Library Information Resources, *Secretary*  
Ken Pierce, Chief Information Officer  
Miguel Sifuentes, Registrar

### **Observers**

Jose Hernandez, Technology Implementation Manager  
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### **Student Members**

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