

University of Missouri-Saint Louis



ITS Administrative Review: Campus Review Team Report

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Presented to: Judith Walker de Felix,
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Review Team Members

External Reviewer: Tom Brenneman, Associate Chief Information Officer, UMKC

Chair: Carl Hoagland, Emerson Electric Co. Professor of Technology and Learning

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Staff Member: Tamara Kratochvil, Director of Technology Transfer and Senior Grant Writer, Office of Research Administration

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Review Stakeholders

Academic Stakeholders

- Peggy Cohen, Center for Teaching and Learning/Academic Affairs
- Jim Fay, Theatre, Dance & Media Studies
- Joel Glassman, International Studies
- Robert Keel, Sociology
- Elizabeth Kellogg, Biology
- Nigam Rath, Chemistry & Biochemistry
- Vicki Sauter, Informational Systems
- Jennifer Siciliani, Psychology
- Teresa Thiel, Biology
- Lon Wilkens, Biology (rev. comm.)
- Keith Womer, Business
- Chung Wong, Chemistry & Biochemistry

External Stakeholders

- Bill Hentschell, CISCO
- Karen Montgomery, AT&T - by phone
- Mike Saputo, Nortel
- Rooney Thomas, Dell

Student Affairs Stakeholders

- Teresa Balestreri, Career Services
- Gina Ganahl, Continuing Education
- Melissa Hattman, Student Affairs
- Alexandra Isaac, OTS Student worker
- Dixie Kohn, University Relations
- John Kundel, Student Affairs
- Greg McCalley, Student Affairs
- Orinthia Montague, Student Affairs
- Maggie O'Toole, Continuing Education
- Betsy Sampson, Graduate School
- Gloria Schultz, Auxiliary Services

Administrative Stakeholders

- Cheryl Bielema, Center for Teaching and Learning
- Gloria Collins, Procurement Services
- Peter Heithaus, Human Resources
- Sylvia Poe, Human Resources
- Joann Wilkinson, Budget Office

■ Review Procedures

The Campus Review Team, in preparing this report, met prior to the on-site review to determine how to best encourage stakeholders to express their opinions regarding ITS services and processes; examined the ITS self-study document; met with ITS staff and stakeholders throughout the day of the on-site review (June 14, 2006), to discuss strengths of, weaknesses of and recommendations for ITS; and reviewed and considered comments from the external reviewer, Tom Brenneman, and his written report.

■ Overview

The Campus Review Team found the ITS self-study document thorough and useful in developing a sense of the overall scope of work and of services provided by the department. It provides a concise, but substantial, accounting of processes and challenges.

In meeting with stakeholders, the review team requested comments on the strengths and weaknesses of ITS. Stakeholder comments were positive overall regarding the improvement of IT services over the last several years; the customer service offered by ITS staff; and the proactive nature of ITS leadership to develop on- and off-campus collaborations to improve infrastructure,

service, student learning and staff productivity. Stakeholder groups provided suggestions on areas that need improvement and recommendations on how to make those improvements.

Below is a review of those comments and suggestions from stakeholders, followed by recommended action items for the ITS department.

■ ITS Strengths

The Review Team heard a clear message from all groups that ITS affects everyone on campus -- students, faculty and staff, and alumni – and can greatly impact work productivity and the student experience. Overall, stakeholders were positive about current services and customer service provided by ITS. In this section, we highlight strengths noted by stakeholders.

Effective Leadership and Management

Dr. Jim Tom, CIO and Associate Vice Chancellor-ITS, as department head, is an innovative thinker with a collaborative leaning. He looks at IT from the perspective of improving the student experience (e.g., career briefings); is willing to entertain new ideas, both from vendors and on-campus communities; is enthusiastic and proactive about developing collaborative projects on campus to support faculty, staff and students; and encourages teamwork among his staff. Vendors noted that ITS management practices are excellent – better than at other UM campuses.

Responsive Support Services

Stakeholders across the board agreed that, in general, the ITS department provides exemplary service.

Help desk personnel, especially for less computer literate users, are knowledgeable, responsive and helpful. The web office and the hardware group also were highlighted as extremely supportive. ITS staff members have provided excellent support for PeopleSoft applications, including work with Admissions, Student Affairs and Human Resources. They also have provided outstanding help with development of programs and continuing services in the Performing Arts/PAC, Continuing Education, Procurement and International Programs departments. Faculty noted that ITS is good about vetting products and demonstrating them to faculty before making decisions on purchases for campus, which they appreciate.

Almost all stakeholder groups noted that the ITS staff size is small for its user population, but production per employee is higher than at many other universities. Special mention was made for offering assistance in funding temporary staff (student) support for implementing high-end computer applications (e.g., the Beowulf Cluster).

Robust Infrastructure

ITS infrastructure is robust. The department made a sound strategic decision to invest in computer hardware early in campus IT development, which put UMSL ahead of its sister campuses.

The robust infrastructure, includes the Beowulf Cluster (high performance computing), which is imperative for computer-intensive research, and the valuable Faculty Resource Center and its online “faculty technology guide.” Another highly regarded infrastructure element provided by ITS is MyGateway, which, according to staff and student stakeholders, is an excellent tool that brings faculty and students together and to the technology. The Desktop Replacement Plan makes it easy for faculty and staff to stay current in technology and is seen by many as seamless. However, some gaps in the program were noted (e.g., the difficulty for some researchers to have to replace their systems that run research-specific software, and changing hardware contracts that make the availability of hardware features inconsistent, even within the same replacement cycle).

Standardization and efficient use of existing facilities was also rated highly.

Proactive Partnerships

Many stakeholders noted that ITS is willing to think “outside the box,” including in developing ideas from outside ITS. The department is seen as a very good collaborative partner.

The department, under Dr. Tom’s leadership, enthusiastically reaches out to campus communities to initiate collaborative efforts that improve student learning and faculty/staff productivity (e.g., the Center for Student Success).

ITS is highly regarded for efforts in educating various stakeholders on technologies and services provided by ITS. They are eager to make presentations on information technology to academic and administrative groups; they also provide various workshops for students, faculty and staff that attendees seem to find quite useful.

Vendors reported good rapport with ITS and noted the benefits of access to appropriate personnel for training and/or procurement of software or hardware. Vendors view internal ITS management practices as excellent, better than at other UM campuses.

■ ITS Weaknesses

An important note regarding weaknesses discussed in this section: many issues identified by stakeholders reflect a need to improve communication, both internally and externally. These and other areas for possible improvement are outlined below.

Personnel

ITS is understaffed and, as the review team learned from a follow-up discussion with Dr. Tom, is finding it difficult to provide competitive wages due to budget constraints. Stakeholders pointed out that there are many more projects than what current staff can support, which particularly results in a delay in response times on larger projects. Stakeholders also concur that retention might be a problem due to lower-than-industry-average salaries.

Related to turnover and staffing decisions, stakeholders pointed out the lack of a mechanism for feedback on personnel who provide services. Faculty and staff want a voice in who they work with in the computer labs and other IT areas, specifically the Mac lab.

Support Services

One major point of concern, particularly for researchers, is the standardization of policies across all users. Some users have special requirements, including the need to avoid updates/reboots that interrupt ongoing software programs. ITS currently has no mechanism to address custom needs, which could be a list of custom users and individual communication regarding required updates. Even the more standard users requested more information (short, single-issue emails) on upcoming updates, etc.

While the service and responsiveness of the Help Desk were consistently pointed out as strengths of the ITS department, some advanced users reported problems getting higher-level questions answered or direction to appropriate staff for help. These users said they did not understand the department structure, so they were not sure where they should go with certain questions. This could be seen either as an issue with help-desk training or communicating to users about staff expertise.

A couple of comments related to the high cost of service of non-desktop computing equipment and peripherals such as printers, scanners, etc. These concerns are offset, perhaps, by the need for standardization of equipment for such service, along with a lack of funding.

Some users noted that online reference materials, possibly a checklist, regarding computer

maintenance would be helpful.

Infrastructure

Capacity of the Beowulf Cluster capacity should be expanded. One researcher pointed out that outsourcing HPC is logistically difficult and expensive, and all capacity provided on campus will be used ("there is never enough"). It should be noted that the high performance computing capacity will expand some when the cluster is moved to the new IT Incubator/HPC Center in 2007.

Regarding port charges, there seems to be a general understanding that these charges help defray overall service costs, but it is difficult in the current situation to reconfigure offices/labs, which can mean new port charges and/or ports going unused.

One communications-based infrastructure issue relates to getting timed out when working with Exchange on the web. Users may not be aware that this will happen or that they can edit in Word and cut-and-paste into an email when finished to avoid losing data.

■ **Recommendations for ITS**

The following recommendations and service refinements are submitted for consideration:

Personnel

- While it is easy to recommend increasing staff size and salaries to enhance services and better retain staff, the Review Team recognizes the financial difficulties of doing so. Dr. Tom is aware of turnover, which turns out to be fairly low (5 out of 80 over the last year, or just over 6%), and the trouble of competitiveness in salaries. He is already working on recruiting efforts and looking into developing formal recruiting of UMSL students. The Review Team recommends he formalize a recruiting plan at UMSL and explore other creative ways to attract and retain talented staff.
- Develop more joint positions with departments to increase staff while sharing costs, and speed response to larger projects similar to those already in existence with the PAC, Academic Affairs and the Library.
- Provide annual feedback/evaluations on personnel (recommendation related to Mac lab support personnel situation where faculty/staff felt they had no say in support changes, which resulted in inadequate support for approximately one year).
- Provide more advanced training for new technologies to ITS staff, pre-cutover time. Train staff in product lines, even vendor non-specific.

Services

- Train desktop program equipment installation staff about ergonomics related to computer set-up to make work stations on campus safe and comfortable. Peter Heithaus in H.R. recommended contacting Kevin Hoffman at Arthur J. Gallagher & Associates.
- Provide quick sign-on/guest accounts.
- Evaluate the possibility of providing email for life for retirees and alumni.
- Evaluate and consider providing online computer check-up/maintenance.
- Evaluate and consider providing some kind of "auto help desk" (possibly live instant messaging or automatic responses) to answer questions, diagnose problems, provide instructions to fix, etc., considering the expansion of distance learning and the need for 24/7 IT help.
- Develop an interdisciplinary project team to address 24-hour support that will be needed for emerging distance learning programs, which are primarily online. (How will ITS support those programs? What are the ramifications of having students/faculty located all over the world?)
- Access to technology:
 - Improvements have been made recently, but the process of getting new faculty and staff connected to services (Outlook, MyGateway, etc.), should be accelerated if possible. Dr. Tom noted in the follow-up discussion that ITS pulls data from HR, which refreshes only once a day, but that there may be ways to tighten the loop on time.

- Some access issues are self-evident, such as providing access for custodial and maintenance staff and keeping up with new student dormitories. Wiring or wireless access in new space is obvious and needs to be consistent with existing dorm space. However, no information was presented by the department relative to existing IT access within student housing, so we don't know whether the status quo is adequate or whether new facilities are needed (e.g., centralized student computing labs in the dormitories).
- Evaluate and determine best methods for providing speedier integration of non-regular faculty and students into the campus IT services.

Infrastructure

- Expand high performance computing capacity for research (Beowulf Cluster/HPC Center) through continued work with the Office of Research Administration on the new IT Incubator/HPC Center.
- Make certain support in campus data centers is at the highest level.

Communication

Although stakeholders were mostly positive about communication efforts of the ITS department (especially the vendors), some areas deserve attention.

- The ITS self study specifically addresses the need for better internal communication. While a small minority, the ITS questionnaires uncovered a degree of discontent, perhaps unavoidable in a department this size. Dr. Tom noted in the study his intentions to improve internal communication, and the Review Team encourages him to do so.
- Increase emphasis on the ITS liaison program to cultivate tech-savvy liaisons to improve communication externally to departments. Increase the program to include liaisons from administrative offices.
- Involve vendors where appropriate in strategic development stage of projects so they can provide better information on products and services.
- Publicize that web applications will time out after a period of no activity, with recommendations on how to avoid losing data. Web applications is an area where additional education may be appropriate.

Policies

- Allow policies to address special/custom needs of faculty doing legitimate, approved research.
 - Develop list of users with special requirements. Possibly allow them to opt out of system-wide updates/rebooting that interrupt ongoing software programs. Provide individual communication with such users when a necessary update needs to be done.
 - The external reviewer suggested 2-way firewalls to keep machines on the internet, network printers and campus updates, but keep out hackers and protect the operating system that research software is usually dependent upon.
- Form a "privacy committee" of faculty, staff, police to address privacy concerns related to Systems Management Services (SMS)

Evaluation

- Use PPRC to formulate surveys to look at issues, e.g. whether advanced users are happy with help desk services, and if not, why.

■ Review Process Summary

The internal administrative review process, while time consuming, is a good method for discovering constituent needs and creative solutions to problems.