
Departmental IT Questionnaire Response and Discussions

Key Points and Conclusions **November 11, 2009**

Current IT Situation in Units

Almost without exception, units feel that their existing IT situation is serving them well. Virtually all units cite a lack of sufficient staffing resources to implement enhancements, some of which would streamline processes and reduce workload outside of IT. All units struggle with a balance between operational and project demands, with the former having to take precedent in most cases. Many units (for example, those in Student Affairs Auxiliary Services) get by with extremely limited IT staffing levels. The potential risk to unit operations by sudden loss of staffing has largely been avoided due to having IT staff who are very dedicated to their jobs.

Functional units feel they benefit significantly from the in-depth functional and business knowledge their technical staff have developed over the years. Having direct access to these IT staff due to their collocation with functional unit colleagues is very important to unit operation. The line between “IT” and “Functional” activities is frequently blurred.

In terms of possible areas for improvement, units cited the opportunity to enhance operations by receiving support for information security and common IT functions such as desktop support, system administration and server operation. Two units noted the need to have additional access to legacy coding environment expertise such as COBOL and PowerBuilder.

Unit Concerns about IT Consolidation

Units are concerned that, from the perspective of OIT and the IT Oversight Committee, their local priorities will be low in comparison with campus-wide priorities and local needs will not be adequately addressed. They worry that shifting control of unique IT resources away from functional units and their leadership will weaken their operating efficiency, flexibility, and ability to get projects done. There is a concern that functional staff could be reassigned; resources might be diverted from “unit A” to “unit B” causing a serious negative impact on the functioning of unit A. One Student Affairs unit noted a concern about the potential to divert resources away from “under-powered, non-academic unit programs and activities greatly valued by students” that may not be as valued by others.

Units feel that a large, central IT organization may not be able to provide timely response to routine support requests. University Extension indicates that they currently field most support requests within 15 minutes or less – will OIT be able to match that? There is apprehension that consolidation will mean project assignments cannot be changed rapidly in response to

changing functional needs, and units will not be able to operate and respond as nimbly as they currently do.

There is considerable concern about the possibility that application support staff might be physically separated from their colleagues who handle everyday business functions. This is based on an assumption that staff moving into OIT would be relocated to OIT office space. This possibility, along with the other uncertainties associated with the consolidation effort, may also be having a negative impact on staff morale. Staff in some areas voiced an interest in leaving the university if they were asked to join OIT.

There could be resources wasted on new bureaucracy stemming from the creation of a large central IT unit, and the process of consolidation itself will take staff time. In the end, combining the undersized and overworked IT staffs of a dozen or more administrative units would probably result in a large unit whose staff is still undersized and overworked.

Benefits from Consolidation

Units saw the following as possible benefits from IT consolidation:

- Being able to outsource commodity IT functions such as help desk and desktop support, training, web support, security management, system administration, server support, backups, and disaster recovery to teams who can focus on those activities. This would allow application programmers to focus on core business needs with fewer interruptions.
- Greater access to a help-desk that can walk people through basic technical problems.
- Additional technical help to departments who have lost IT positions through attrition.
- Creating a pool of backup talent in legacy areas such as PowerBuilder and COBOL.
- Allowing IT staff across different units to share knowledge and skill sets. IT staff may be provided with greater opportunities for new challenges that previously would not have been possible.
- Clearly defined job descriptions, higher standards of excellence, easier sharing of resources, skills and technology innovations, stronger and more secure web applications, possibility for centralized codebases and repositories for developers, campus-wide data management systems.
- Greater access to training for common IT software tools.
- The establishment of campus software and coding standards, and the availability of peer reviews to reduce inconsistencies among systems performance.
- Making some existing services more widely known on campus (for example, those from Document and Delivery Management).

Conclusions

IT staffing levels in many departments are low with respect to client needs and often depend on a very close working relationship with non-IT staff in units to carry out IT functions. We must move carefully to not disrupt the current somewhat fragile state of affairs in some units by making abrupt large-scale changes.

The priority focus for early stages of IT consolidation should be on the provision of “commodity” services: desktop, system administration, server, security support, and the like. This area represents the most fertile ground for realizing increased efficiencies, and enhancing overall IT service delivery.

Opportunities for increased efficiencies in the area of application software support are more subtle and will require greater care to realize. In most, but not all, situations, programming staff should remain collocated with functional units while closer relationships to OIT are incrementally established.

The immediate goals of enhancing OIT/unit-programmer ties would be:

- to facilitate offloading of commodity functions away from programmers;
- to encourage the exchange of expertise and knowledge among OIT and unit software maintenance and development staff;
- to support the creation and adoption of campus IT standards; and
- to gain a thorough understanding of IT and corresponding business needs in functional units.

The increased understanding of local IT would help identify limited opportunities for reallocating programming staff to achieve top campus priorities, and lead to the creation of a fully integrated campus approach to IT within 1-2 years.

It should be noted that software maintenance and development functions cannot be managed solely by having a pool of interchangeable programmers due to the complexities of individual software application systems. Every major business function will require a core set of programmers dedicated to it to maintain both business and detailed system expertise related to the function. However, the establishment of programmer pools to allow augmentation of core staffing to accomplish critical projects will certainly play a role in UCI’s future software strategy.

A critically important outcome of the consolidation effort must be the development of a campus process for identifying IT projects whose implementation furthers UCI’s business goals. The completion of certain IT projects could result in streamlining processes and significantly lowering operation costs, or increasing opportunities such as attracting and maintaining students and research funding. A business case for each promising project must be developed to inform a decision on the investment of resources. In some cases resources may come from those already on campus; in other cases the net savings/income from completing the project may justify an investment in additional application software resources.