

Memo

To: Senate Steering Committee (AY 2023-2024)

Amy Banes-Berceli, PhD
Associate Provost for Operations

From: Sam Srauy, PhD
Associate Professor of Communication and Academic Computing Committee
(2023-2024)

CC: Kathy Dailey

RE: End of the year report. Academic Computing Committee (2023-2024).

Dear Assoc. Provost Banes-Berceli and Senate Steering Committee:

I respectfully submit this report as chair of the Academic Computing Committee for the academic year 2023-2024. This report memorializes our work during this term along with some recommendations. We formally met as a team on five occasions and continued our work across the University's Google Spaces application. I would like to report on the project and the on-going committee support work in which we engaged.

Academic Year Deliverable

The committee elected to review the campus community's overall level of satisfaction with the technological services provided by the university's many information technology and IT adjacent groups (e.g., UTS, eLIS, CSITS, and various College/School based support services). We met throughout the academic year to both discuss the changes in infrastructure (such as the South Foundation renovation and the East Campus). What we realized is that contrary to a corporate model where a centralized IT department has jurisdiction over the entire enterprise, Oakland University adopts an ecological model. I will discuss what I mean before I continue. But I will note that this discussion, while illuminating, did not result in any deliverable. Rather, it spurred another conversation about fund allocation for technology needs.

Background: The centralized model vs the OU model

I will refer to what we call the “centralized” model whereby information technology is centralized in one department that has the authority to dictate computing policy. This has many advantages, such as consistency of security and end user experience. What this lacks, on the other hand, is the ability to adapt to numerous — often contradictory needs— from various stakeholders. For instance, should a user be permitted to install a particular software? Depending on the centralized administrators ability, misunderstanding, or desire of the need, the user might be denied something that is critical. What happens if a technological workflow or use scenario that a discipline needs seemingly violates the hypothetical IT department’s policy? A reactive IT manager might deny the request outright, necessitating appeals. Or in an extreme scenario, appeals might become the normal process throughout which the university adapts to evolving use cases. Of course, this is terribly inefficient and likely to encourage discontent. This is not how OU currently operates.

Currently, OU operates in an “ecological” approach. That is, each College/School (and some individual departments) have their own IT-like staff members. This is beneficial for numerous reasons. Mainly, these staff members can become more intimately involved in understanding the discipline’s technology needs. As a result, UTS operates as the “infrastructure” akin to an internet service provider and eLIS, CSITS, and individual IT-like staff members (at the College/School and department levels) operate as general technology providers. This mirrors the world outside the university. Likewise, this puts an enormous strain on faculty, students, and other staff members (i.e., end users) to coordinate these various providers. Effectively end users must be able to advocate for themselves, often in an unfamiliar and constantly evolving language. Simply put, end users may need to ask questions or they do not know how to ask or describe needs in very specific ways to efficiently solve those problems.

Continuing Tasks

This discussion led to the committee recognizing various related problems. One of these problems is that we currently do not have a good sense of what the software/technology needs of faculty are in general. To that end, we spent the remainder of the academic year developing a survey that balances open ended and specific questions that may provide more insight. We are currently working on this, and this task will continue into the next academic year.

Immediate Deliverable Insight

In our discussion, we have one insight that is clear— the funds provided for faculty technology upgrades is insufficient for today’s market. Our understanding is that faculty are allotted \$1700 every four years to account for computing needs and upgrades, *if the funds are available*. However, this is woefully under-resourced. Unfortunately, technology is at the core of the university and many academic disciplines. For instance, technological needs are no longer the domain of specialized units. Departments as diverse as engineering and art history require powerful equipment that need to be kept relatively current. Consider a hypothetical Assistant Professor in electrical engineering and another in graphic design. For both of these faculty members, \$1700 would not be sufficient to provide an adequate computer because they would need at least a mid-level graphics card that can process machine learning and generative AI tools that are expected of their research and creative projects. To be frank, such needs are no longer specialized needs, but a baseline requirement for faculty like these. A mid-level graphics card alone exceeds the \$1700 allotment. (Please see [this](#) Amazon listing for reference.) To further complicate matters, all faculty have ancillary technology expenses (e.g., monitors, keyboards, web cameras). They must either tap into their department’s general budget, their Dean’s budget, or through this \$1700 allotment. In our discussion, we noted that some have heard the expectation that such expenses would be met through external grant funding. However, this is not tenable as funders generally require a record of research or creative works that warrants funding— a record that is often impossible to

provide without a way to fund similar works in the first place. We noted that this \$1700 allotment has been in place for at least a decade.

I would like to personally note, that while I am unable to find the exact written policy that outlines this \$1700 every four year computer upgrade cycle, it functionally has become an understood norm. Nearly all faculty members of the committee have heard this repeated.

We recommend, therefore, that the budgeted technology allocation be increased or augmented. While \$1700 might still be adequate for a large percentage of the faculty body, it is a sum that greatly harms the effectiveness of an increasingly large number of faculty members. This deficiency would, in the long run, damage Oakland University's ability to recruit talented faculty and students to our institution. The exact amount or whether this increase fund should come from a regular "specialized technology" pool is outside the scope of our discussion. We may have further insight after completing our ongoing survey. However, we ask that the university preemptively act in anticipation of our findings.

This concludes a summation of the work outputs for our committee in the 2023-2024 academic year. Again, I appreciate your time. Please feel free to contact us with any questions and suggestions. We welcome the opportunity to continue to serve the campus community in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Sam Srauy, PhD
Associate Professor
Academic Computing Committee Chair