

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING
MARCH 7, 2006

[In these minutes:

Accessibility of Information Technology, Obsolete Information on University Websites, Electronic Textbook Links on Bookstore Websites, 2006 – 2007 SCIT Meeting Schedule, April Agenda Items]

[These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions or actions reported in these minutes represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate, the Administration or the Board of Regents.]

PRESENT:

Andy Lopez, chair, Nancy Herther, Mark Sanders, John See, Dale Swanson, Deanette Schmidt, Stephen Cawley, Eric Celeste, Alan Ek, Joan Hughes, Jim Waddell, Mahmoud Sadrai

REGRETS: Linda Jorn, Christine Blue, Douglas Ernie, Greg Laden, Myron Lowe, John H. Miller

GUEST: Professor Patrick McNamara, chair, Disabilities Issues Committee

OTHERS: Wokie Grigsby, Bernard Gulachek, Scott Ruud

I). Professor Lopez called the meeting to order.

II). Members unanimously approved the February 7, 2006 minutes.

III).

Professor Lopez welcomed Professor Patrick McNamara, chair of the Senate Disabilities Issues Committee to today's meeting.

Professor McNamara stated that he comes before SCIT to garner support for a resolution, which would mandate compliance by the University community with the University's Accessibility of Information Technology (AIT) Policy.

A handout, containing background information and suggested recommendations by the Disabilities Issues Committee for ensuring compliance with the AIT policy, was distributed to members.

Professor McNamara noted that in the spring of 2005 the Disabilities Issues Committee requested Disabilities Services conduct an accessibility to information technology audit. This request was prompted by a student representative who was concerned about access to web-based learning technology on campus. In asking for this report, the Disability Issues Committee recognized the importance of establishing accessible, universally designed information technology environments due to the increasing centrality of information technology related to learning and working at the University.

Audit results indicated that despite the fact that accessibility to information technology had improved since the AIT policy was adopted in March 2002, glaring accessibility problems remained e.g. WebCT, PeopleSoft, numerous on-line official University forms, etc.

A member commented that:

- While the report was informative, it, along with the recommendations, lacked specificity.
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The recommendation to create an Accessibility Testing Laboratory should be tied into the work currently being done at the Usability Services Laboratory (<http://web.umn.edu/Webteam/usability/usabilityLab.html>).

With the emergence of AJAX technology the number of inaccessible websites may be reduced depending on how this technology interfaces with screen readers and other adaptive devices.

Steve Cawley stated that OIT fully supports the spirit of the report and recommendations put forth by the Disabilities Issues Committee.

He added, however, that while the University is one of the leaders nationally in disability usability testing in higher education, a lot of work remains. Disability usability testing is quite complex.

In Professor McNamara's opinion, creating an Accessibility Testing Laboratory is consistent with the new budget model that is being rolled out.

Besides facilitating the transfer of revenue within the University for accessibility testing services, such a lab could be used to generate income from commercial vendors, and put the University in a position to set accessibility standards that would be higher than that of current vendors. Steve Cawley remarked that the challenge is to have vendors make their software not only accessible, but user-friendly as well.

A member asked whether, as part of this audit, the University community was consulted regarding what the University's next steps should be to improve accessibility to information technology. Professor McNamara stated that the Disabilities Issues Committee has discussed the issue on numerous occasions and so has the Disabled Students Cultural Center (DSCC), who conducted a survey of users of adaptive technology to determine their satisfaction.

Anecdotally, Professor McNamara has heard that because some of the adaptive technology is loud, disabled students are reluctant to use it, particularly during peak times so as not to disrupt other students.

A member asked Professor McNamara who would be responsible for ensuring compliance with the recommendations put forward by the Disabilities Issues Committee. The Access to Information Technology Subcommittee of the Disabilities Issues Committee would likely be responsible for identifying, which administrative units should be assigned jurisdiction over the recommendations requiring establishment/oversight.

Or, as part of a broader Senate discussion, units committed to these efforts such as Disabilities Services, OIT, etc. could hopefully be recruited to accept responsibility for oversight of the policy.

A member shared with Professor McNamara that within the University community open source course management systems such as Moodle are being explored. The time may be right to use the University's influence to contact Moodle software developers to ask them to examine accessibility issues. This, in turn, may force other vendors to start thinking about the accessibility of their products.

Clarification was sought with regard to the recommendation that third party vendors and University of Minnesota software developers be held accountable for creating accessible software, hardware and web-based applications.

Does this recommendation pertain to current vendor contracts or would it be instituted on a going-forward basis for future software purchases?

According to Professor McNamara, the current AIT policy stipulates accessibility to information technology. This recommendation serves to enforce the policy and raise it to a higher level of awareness. A member stated that if the University expects to be a leader in the accessibility of information technology arena, it should define what being "held accountable" means. If the University continues to make exceptions when purchasing non-accessible software, no real progress will ever be made. Steve Cawley noted that whenever the University makes a software purchase, accessibility language is written into the RFP and subsequent contract. As with any contract, there are aspects that are debatable. While the University tests products before they purchase, it is often impossible to test thoroughly enough before a product is implemented. Mr. Cawley raised the question of how the University's multitude of policies should be enforced.

It was further suggested that the verbiage in the recommendation section of this statement be made more forceful.

The current language does not give the statement the punch it needs if enforcement is truly the desired goal. Professor McNamara acknowledged this suggestion and stated that, to a degree, the Disabilities Issues Committee intentionally did not come forward with too bold of a statement in order to solicit the endorsement of as many Senate committees as possible. The generality of the statement was deliberate. The goal of the Disabilities Issues Committee is to have the report stimulate conversation and buy-in from as many groups as possible before being brought to the Senate for action.

A suggestion was made to have the statement set accessibility standards for the University first and then rollout these requirements to vendors.

By doing this, it would demonstrate to vendors the University's commitment to accessible technology.

A member recommended that the Disabilities Issues Committee tour the Usability Services Laboratory in Walter Library because it would likely be helpful to see what kind of accessibility testing is currently being done.

Professor McNamara asked the committee whether they support the creation of an Accessibility Testing Laboratory as a starting point for generating awareness around accessible technology issues. It was noted that the Usability Services Laboratory currently does accessibility testing, and that any efforts to expand this service should be coordinated between the lab and the Disabilities Issues Committee.

To conclude, while members supported the substance of the accessibility to information technology statement, they suggested that before they vote on it that the Disabilities Issues Committee consider revising it to incorporate the suggestions mentioned today. Professor McNamara thanked the committee for their time, and agreed to share this feedback with the Disabilities Issues Committee.

IV).

Professor Lopez reported that the next item of business, obsolete information on University websites, was referred to the committee by Professor Jean Bauer, chair of the FCC. University Relations owns the policy, which governs publishing information on the web:

http://www.fpd.finop.umn.edu/groups/ppd/documents/policy/Publishing_on_WWW.cfm

Professor Lopez expressed concern over removing obsolete websites because it may be the only way to historically track what has transpired at the University. However, in terms of obsolete forms, members were in agreement that something should be done to ensure that sites containing forms be kept up-to-date.

A member stated that the University community should take responsibility for what it communicates. Therefore, if a unit has out-of-date information on their website they should be contacted and asked to update the information. Ideally, there should be a contact person for each site to facilitate this process. It was also noted that the problem of out-of-date forms could likely be attributed to units that cut and paste links to forms that belong to other units' sites.

If this is the case, the committee may want to endorse a statement that stipulates that units cannot provide a link to a form that does not belong to their unit on their website because this prohibits proper maintenance of the information contained on the site.

Alternatively, the committee could recommend that the University community use the Google Search Appliance (<http://www1.umn.edu/google/>), the University's new on-campus search engine, to ensure that official University forms are brought to the top of the result set.

A member noted that the University has a Forms Library

(<http://www.fpd.finop.umn.edu/groups/ppd/documents/main/formhome.cfm>), which contains all University forms and their respective owners.

It was mentioned, however, that there are departments that create their own forms, which they do not put in the Forms Library.

Steve Cawley stated that based on this discussion a clear problem exists around obsolete forms on University websites.

Therefore, he requested the opportunity to convene a group outside of this committee to think through this problem.

He will report back to the committee the groups findings and recommendations at the committee's May meeting.

On a quasi-related note, Wokie Grisby from University Relations announced that as part of Beautiful U Day 2006, University Relations is planning to encourage members of the University community to clean up their websites. There are websites housed on servers that no longer exist and that are taking up space. A member stated that space is not the issue because it makes no difference whatsoever, but rather it is the pollution of search results.

In fact, what might appear as pollution and clutter to some, for others is a valued historical record of what has transpired at the University. Some would argue this information has value and should be retained. Ms. Grisby was asked whether University Relations plans to offer advise on what content should be saved and what content should be discarded.

She indicated that University Relations has listed some examples, but it would ultimately left up to departments to determine how important their content is.

Another member expressed concern over the lack of a central place for finding University calendar information.

It was noted that University Relations has set up a central location to post this type of information, but, unfortunately, it is not being fully utilized.

Steve Cawley stated that OIT will explore in conjunction with University Relations how to improve utilization of this site by the University community.

Before wrapping up this discussion, a member conveyed an unpleasant experience of being contacted by a CLA server administrator to take down a website because no new information had been uploaded into the site for quite some time.

Steve Cawley expressed concern over server administrators asking members of the University community to wipe out this type of information, particularly if it has not been archived. This example raises library archival issues.

Eric Celeste shared the same concern and noted that the Library has recently created the University Digital Conservancy (UDC), which is in its infancy.

While the UDC test server has been set up, it is not in a position, at least at this time, to address this problem, particularly as it relates to complex web pages, which are not simple documents, but rather a collection of documents that relate to one another.

To represent this information properly, a server that knows how to keep these relationships in tact must be used. While the Library knows how to archive web pages, it is not a simple undertaking. The Library anticipates being able to capture this type information within the next year or two.

Professor Lopez volunteered to consult with FCC Chair Jean Bauer to make sure the committee understands the issue that it has been asked to address in order to make sure it is on the right track.

V). Professor Lopez noted that the University policy *Publishing Information on the World Wide Web* has been used to deny the Morris bookstore from putting links on its bookstore's website to electronic textbook

publishers.

Mr. Cawley commented that in his opinion links to electronic textbook publishers would be permissible and that it would be no different than the University's business relationship with TechMart, which is considered a legitimate business relationship between the University and an outside commercial vendor.

As a result of this interpretation, Professor Lopez asked which University department would be the most appropriate to contact to request clarifying language be drafted around this policy. Mr. Cawley stated that clarifying language should be drafted out of the Office of the Vice President for University Relations.

A member asked whether it would be a violation of this policy for a faculty member to have a link on his or her website and that link led to subsequent purchases for which the faculty member received financial remuneration in the form of a kickback.

Steve Cawley indicated that this example might violate the University's Conflict of Interest Policy because it could be construed as misuse of a faculty member's authority to direct business to a vendor for personal gain. This is a different issue from the electronic textbook link on a bookstore website. The electronic textbook link, again, in Mr. Cawley's opinion, would seem to be a legitimate business relationship.

VI). It was reported that Nancy Herther has agreed to chair SCIT for the 2006 – 2007 academic year. To establish a meeting schedule for 2006 – 2007, members were asked whether they would be able to continue to meet on the first Tuesday of each month, but to move the meetings to the morning as opposed to afternoons. Members were in agreement.

Once the meeting rooms have been secured an announcement will be sent out so members can mark their calendars accordingly.

VII). Professor Lopez requested members input for April agenda items:

- Status update on the Morris campus electronic textbook link issue.
- Security and portability issues.
- Xythos (content and collaboration software) demonstration.
- Mandatory, on-line security training.

VIII). Hearing no further business, Professor Lopez adjourned the meeting.

Renee Dempsey
University Senate