

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING
MARCH 3, 2009

[In these minutes: President's Emerging Leaders Research Cyberinfrastructure Alliance Project, Federal Stimulus Funding Subcommittee, Central Data Storage,]

[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: Mark Sanders, chair, Craig Gjerdingen, Dale Swanson, Paul Rubenis, John Butler, Stephen Cawley, Danielle Tisinger, Billie Wahlstrom, Lee Anderson, David Arendale, Ted Higman, Michael Korth, Brent Larson, Josephine Lee, Stuart Speedie, Ben Franske, Dan Garon, Ben Kucera

REGRETS: Sue Van Voorhis, Aaron Doering, Bonnie Westra, Linda Jorn

OTHERS ATTENDING:

President's Emerging Leaders Team Members - Tracy Anderson, microscopist and digital imaging specialist; Craig Gjerdingen, applications development manager, CSOM; Bryan Herrmann, senior associate director for enrollment, Morris; Katherine Himes, PhD, assistant to the Provost; Lisa Johnston, assistant librarian, University Libraries

Simin Hickman, director, OIT – Customer Engagement; Myron Lowe, director, OIT – External Technology Initiatives

I). Mark Sanders called the meeting to order.

II). Members unanimously approved the amended February 3, 2009 SCIT minutes.

III). Mr. Sanders reported that due to a family emergency, Tom Jones, interim director, Minnesota Supercomputing Institute, is unable to attend today's meeting. He will be rescheduled for an upcoming meeting.

IV). Mr. Sanders welcomed Tracy Anderson, Bryan Herrmann, Katherine Himes, and Lisa Johnston, members of the President's Emerging Leaders (PEL) group who are working with the Research Cyberinfrastructure Alliance (RCA).

Katherine Himes, PEL team member, began by explaining that the PEL group's charge is to work with key stakeholders at the University to develop a strategic approach to cyberinfrastructure that leverages partnerships across the institution. She explained that the PEL team is looking at not only the University's central and local infrastructures but also the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) research cyberinfrastructure directives.

The PEL team is:

- Conducting an environmental scan to determine what other institutions are doing related to research cyberinfrastructure. For example, have other institutions created new degree programs and/or RCA-like groups around information technology.
- Surveying research cyberinfrastructure end-users at the University. Areas covered in the survey include:
 - a. Demographics
 - b. Storage management and networking
 - c. Collaboration with virtual communities
 - d. Software and instrumentation use for research
 - e. High performance computing
 - f. Workforce development
 - g. Follow-up with users who have additional information to share

The survey will be launched on March 23, 2009, and the results will be interpreted the end of April into May. In addition, the PEL RCA team will be examining other recent in-depth user studies that have been conducted at the University in the past two years, and conducting a meta-analysis of all data, if possible.

- Building awareness of what research means at the University. Beyond the sciences, the PEL team will look at what the arts and humanities need in terms of research cyberinfrastructure.
- Helping the University become a leader in the research cyberinfrastructure arena.
- Identifying partnerships within the University and with other institutions, etc.
- Determining where cyberinfrastructure costs can be reduced and where efficiencies can be increased.
- Ensuring that the University is complying with NIH and NSF directives and suggestions.

Mr. Sanders stated that this is clearly a very ambitious project. He asked how the federal stimulus funding would play into the timing of the team's report. A PEL team member reported that Sponsored Projects Administration has compiled a summary of the NIH Request for Applications (RFA) that includes general information, information for PIs, and information for research administrators. A pdf of this document can be found in the NIH section of the table on the

Office for the Vice President for Research (OVPR) stimulus funding web page, which is at: <http://www.research.umn.edu/stimulus.html>.

A SCIT member stated that the PEL RCA findings have timing implications for researchers. In response, Mr. Sanders requested the PEL team keep this in mind despite the fact their final report is not due until June. Given the project's findings will be broadly valuable, noted Mr. Sanders, hopefully the raw data can be shared prior to the final report.

Mr. Sanders asked how many people the PEL RCA team plans to survey. A PEL member stated that this will be a large survey; roughly 8,000 members of the University community will be surveyed. Incentives will be offered to entice people to take the time to complete the survey.

Mr. Sanders thanked the PEL team for their report today. He requested that they return to the committee's May 5 meeting, and summarize the findings from the survey they conducted.

In closing, Dr. Himes announced that Lisa Johnston recently joined the PEL RCA team. She noted that Ms. Johnston brings an excellent perspective to the team from the University Libraries.

Billie Wahlstrom added that there are several conversations this committee should be having as it relates to the federal stimulus funding. For example, the State is expecting to receive \$4 million for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) - <http://www.doleta.gov/USWORKFORCE/WIA/act.cfm>. While the University of Minnesota has not recently participated in this program, which gives tuition vouchers for qualified individuals, it plans to do so.

Mr. Sanders stated that while it is not on today's agenda, he asked for volunteers to serve on a SCIT subcommittee that would help disseminate federal stimulus funding information. He would like the full committee of SCIT and this subcommittee to be a conduit for disseminating this very important information. Professor Stuart Speedie and Myron Lowe agreed to serve on the subcommittee, as did Mark Sanders. Professor Speedie added that there are a number of aspects of the federal stimulus package that the OVPR is not addressing that are relevant to the University community. Mr. Sanders thank Professor Speedie and Mr. Lowe for agreeing to serve on this subcommittee and added that additional members would be recruited.

V). Mr. Sanders reported that the Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) passed a motion asking SCIT to explore central data storage for all faculty (a couple terabyte per faculty). The FCC is of the opinion that this data storage should be provided by the University as a service because of state and federal laws that require the protection of the data. Mr. Sanders indicated that he will be reporting to the FCC on SCIT's findings in May.

Over the years, noted Mr. Sanders, SCIT has learned about various data storage resources at the University, e.g., SANS, Active Directory, Netfiles. He then turned to Vice President and Chief Information Officer Steve Cawley to comment on this request. Vice President Cawley stated that this is a valid and reasonable request from the FCC. This is a common problem. The Office of Information Technology (OIT) has done a lot in terms of providing central storage services. Naturally, the cost to provide additional services and to scale these services in the current budget environment will prove challenging.

Vice President Cawley stated that data storage is a big topic nationally, and particularly among research universities. The CIC has been working on this issue for roughly a year. They began by exploring whether there is a service that could provide unlimited storage at a reasonable cost that would scale forever. A Request for Information (RFI) was issued to see what cloud computing solutions would be available or whether collectively the CIC could build its own cloud.

This is an urgent issue, noted Vice President Cawley, given that every year a significant amount of valuable information is lost. Besides the RAM storage, there needs to be a way to retrieve the data. He added that while he welcomes the challenge of the FCC, serious thought needs to be given as to how to address this issue in a cost effective manner.

Mr. Sanders stated that it is clear that there are a number of OIT resources that are available that people are unaware of. He thanked Vice President Cawley for his suggestion to invite Jim Hall and Jac Hoffsten to a future meeting to discuss this issue further. Vice President Cawley added that the college IT directors are also working very closely with OIT on optimizing the current internal storage strategy and next steps. The IT directors are another body this group could reach out to.

In response to a comment, a member noted that there seems to be a fair amount of unused capacity in terms of Netfiles. Having said this, is this a perceptual gap or real storage gap. Mr. Sanders stated that in the research realm there is often a need for faster bandwidth and data access, and Netfiles does not have the capability to meet these needs for many investigators. Vice President Cawley added that it will be important to better understand researchers' needs in order to know when local storage is appropriate or when collegiate, central, or cloud storage are better options.

A faculty member of the committee commented that many faculty do not care what kind of storage it is (local, collegiate, central or cloud), they simply do not want to have to think about it. The productivity of faculty members should not depend on the underlying infrastructure. Mr. Sanders stated that this is the sense he got from the FCC as well. He added that there is a fair amount of low-hanging fruit around this issue, and communication about the current storage options would be an important first step. Vice President Cawley stated that while OIT currently has a solution for generic storage requests, there are a number of much more sophisticated needs out there as well.

A member stated that storage solutions need to facilitate collaboration so data can be easily shared. Mr. Sanders added that while the Xythos Netfiles offers this capability, the limitation around file sizes must be looked at. Vice President Cawley suggested discussing this issue with Tom Jones from the Minnesota Supercomputing Institute.

Mr. Sanders stated that another issue is storage backup. There are many different backup storage strategy models, but backup is the most expensive component of this process. From a technology perspective, storage solutions and backup solutions are two distinct issues.

A member stated that a lot of today's discussion has been centered around faculty and research needs, but, from a student services perspective, a significant amount of information/records are being put on-line. Ms. Wahlstrom stated that the University is increasingly being pressured to offer more on-line courses, which, in turn, creates a legal obligation to deliver these courses. Offering on-line courses has significant storage and backup implications.

John Butler stated in the context of e-research/e-science, the Library has formed a collaborative task force to explore a variety of these issues, and one area is data stewardship. This task force recently issued a draft report, which this committee would likely be interested in reviewing. Mr. Sanders stated that when this report can be broadly shared, it should be brought to SCIT for information.

VI). Mr. Sanders asked members whether there was other business that anyone wanted to bring forward. A member asked Vice President Cawley about the University's vision for messaging services/mobile computing. Vice President Cawley stated that this is an issue that OIT can address with the committee at a future meeting. He added that OIT has created a task force to explore mobile computing, which is being led by Ann Hill Duin. The University, he noted, has had integrated voice mail into email for the past 5 – 6 years, and it is underutilized. Given the fact it is underutilized probably means that OIT has not done an adequate job promoting/advertising this feature enough.

Is the University considering getting rid of its Microsoft license in lieu of Google Apps and getting rid of WebVista in lieu of Moodle asked a member? No, stated Vice President Cawley, Google Apps at the University will target students only in the teaching environment. The University has licensed Google Apps and Gmail for students, and it will be introduced to the freshman class in the fall of 2009. There are no current plans to replace the University's email accounts for faculty and staff; there are legal issues around doing so, e.g., what information can and cannot be stored in Google Apps – Google is not compliant with export control laws.

In terms of WebVista, stated Vice President Cawley, this is a legitimate question to ask long-term, but no decision has been made as of now. At this point there have only been some very preliminary discussions about how to analyze the question around WebVista versus Moodle. Moodle's use at the University is growing at a much faster rate than WebVista. Anecdotally, OIT is hearing that faculty are more satisfied with Moodle than WebVista. In addition, Moodle is open source, and WebVista is an expensive product. Any decision to eliminate WebVista and migrate to Moodle would require sensitivity to faculty workload and the University's ability to support this migration. OIT should be in a better position to discuss the WebVista versus Moodle issue in the fall after it has had time to explore it further.

VII). Hearing no other business, Mr. Sanders thanked today's guests and members for their participation in today's meeting, which was then adjourned.

Renee Dempsey
University Senate