

Study to assist in plan for a new telecommunications system

On December 9, Susan Cooperider, director of administrative services, sent a campus-wide email concerning a study being conducted by Elert and Associates Consulting Firm.

“The purpose of the study is to assist the University with evaluating its current technological status and to make recommendations to develop a strategic technology network infrastructure plan for the campus,” read the email. “The current telecommunications system is fourteen years old and the manufacturer has initiated the “End of Life” process for this product.” This means replacement parts will no longer be available for the University’s current phone system, which is in bad condition.

“The end users don’t see problems, so they don’t know or understand [the situation],” said Cooperider later in an interview. “I’m afraid it will just die one day and there’ll be nothing to be done about it.” She said the normal life of a telecommunication system is seven to eight years, and ours is quickly approaching 15 years.

The study being conducted by Elert and Associates first looked at OWU’s current situation and assessed its future needs with focus groups of students, faculty and staff. This was finished over winter break. They then compared OWU to other members of the Five Colleges of Ohio (The College of Wooster, Denison University, Kenyon College, Oberlin College and OWU) and looked at the firm’s experiences with similar schools across the nation.

According to Cooperider and Tony Smith, director information systems, the study is to be completed by mid-May.

To complement the study, Administrative Services and Information Systems conducted an online survey last week asking students questions about our current telecommunications system and what they expect from one in the future.

This study is to come up with a direction for a future plan to revamp the entire telecommunications system at OWU. This includes both the telephone system and the network.

“Decisions, in the future, about expending scarce resources will be better informed as a result [of this study],” said Provost Bill Louthan. He also said a “total fix” of the system would require the expenditure of several hundred-thousand dollars for equipment and staff that the University doesn’t have. According to Cooperider, there was no budget for improvements as of last month. She is expecting it to come either through a capital campaign or straight from the University.

Jeff Sindelar, president of WCSA, said the Trustees are enthusiastic about the upcoming project and will cooperative in funding it as soon as there is a plan.

The study is to gauge where we are and where we should be, said Sindelar. It was initially supposed to be done by February, he said, but has been delayed until summer.

Sindelar said he wishes he could see something started before the end of the year. “It upsets me,” he said. “I wish we could get a plan for construction.”

Part of the study concerns the fiber optic line running from InfoSys, in the Corns Building, to Smith, providing a network connection to the residential side.

According to Harold Wiebe, professor of mathematics/computer sciences and director of the computer center, this is a multi-mode fiber. This means the speed at which it transmits packets of information is limited by the distance those packets have to travel. Wiebe said the line is about maxed out now, meaning the speed could not be increased without giving up distance.

“I’m quite sure its part of the study,” said Wiebe. This line is shared by both the network and phone system and was installed in the early 90’s. “The older infrastructure has got to be replaced,” he said, referring to this line as well as other part of the network.

Jason LaMar, director of web services, hopes to see more protection against viruses as part of the plan for a new system. “Right now the network is completely open, no firewall, no virus or worm protection (except for the J/CX server),” he said. “The solution is logistically easy, but financially difficult. We need more hardware, better hardware.”

Unfortunately, financing has continued to plague the system. “I’m not trying to criticize InfoSys,” Lamar said. “There is a legacy that they don’t have staffing or funding to service campus the way it should be.”

“[With] our minimal staff and resources, we aren’t able to handle all the projects we want,” said Smith. InfoSys currently employs 12 people, one being faculty member Wiebe. They also employ many students who help monitor the computer labs and provide technical support for students, staff and faculty computers.

The increase in demands from students, faculty and staff has been much more than InfoSys has been able to keep up with.

“What they’ve done has helped, but not at the same rate as the demand,” said Sindelar. “This is something the student body would like to see happen overnight, but it will take time.”

“With the help of the administration and the trustees, the next two years will see a complete reversal, hopefully,” he said.

“I liken computer [and communication] technologies today to early the early automobile industry,” said Richard Fusch, associate dean of academic affairs and professor of geology/geography. He said Daimler invented the car in the 19th Century when he and Benz built the first car. The “Auto Age” didn’t start until the 1920’s and up until the 1950’s cars broke down all the time and were a lot less reliable.

“There is a phenomenal difference between my childhood cars and cars today,” he said.