

## **Frequently Asked Questions About the IT Strategic Plan**

During the initial review of Sacramento State's draft Information technology strategic plan, several questions have come up repeatedly. Since there is so much interest in these particular issues, we're providing this brief FAQ so that everyone can easily review answers to these questions.

### **Is the IT strategic plan based on our new campus *Strategic Plan*?**

Yes, in large part it is. The overall intent is to align campus-wide IT resources and planning as best we can with the main strategic goals of the campus. In particular, the IT plan was aligned around the primary strategic focus of the campus, which is "Achieving ever-higher levels of student learning and academic excellence while optimizing student access and success." The IT plan has particular applicability to the specific goals of "implementing a campus-wide focus to improve student recruitment, retention, and graduation rates," "facilitating evidence-based decision-making and purposeful planning," and "enhancing campus-wide engagement for the resolution of complex issues," especially through implementing effective communication channels. Parts of the IT plan are more specifically related to technology issues than is the campus strategic plan, but the issues addressed are by and large still focused on the strategic implications of the use of technology. The IT plan is also responsive to the strategic IT issues that are prominent in the CSU's new strategic plan, *Access To Excellence*.

### **Why doesn't the plan include the area of information technology I'm involved in?**

By their very nature, strategic plans focus on only the most critical issues. The strategic planning process typically involves early identification of strengths and weaknesses in an area of interest, with Sac State's Strategic Planning Council describing the resulting planning process as follows:

"The overlap of internal weaknesses and external threats shapes the organization's highest priorities, directing resources toward situations that, if not addressed, could threaten the organization. The ability to leverage internal strengths against external opportunities creates a second set of priorities that, if addressed expediently, should benefit the organization."

One result of this approach to IT strategic planning is that functions that are going relatively well or that run in the background as utilities don't get as much attention as strengths or weaknesses. That doesn't mean those functions aren't important; indeed, one of the reasons the functions aren't mentioned as new strategic initiatives is that they're already *assumed* to be critical to the campus. The attention paid to the ongoing issues of business process improvement, the refresh of critical

IT infrastructure, and similar is testament to the importance of these background and utility functions to strategic planning for IT.

### **Does the campus-wide plan mean that everything about IT is going to be centralized?**

No. For one thing, the dispersion of IT functions such as web development, information security, etc. make it virtually impossible to control things from one place anyway. For another, the dichotomy between 'centralization' and 'decentralization' is far too simplistic to capture the complexities and nuances of managing IT resources that are used by almost everyone on campus every single day. All four of the external studies of IT conducted at Sacramento State over the last ten years have noted that the campus needs to find a way to move constructively beyond the narrow terms of a central/local discussion. The Thomcheck report of 2000 concisely summarizes the consultants' advice as follows:

'I believe the biggest challenge is the same one Blackwell [previous study by IBM] brought up, whether CSUS has the drive to move past the tactical centralized versus decentralized arguments and move on to an understanding that the true challenge of IT support at CSUS is to achieve the proactive vision:'

"To be seen by the consumers of our efforts as continually working to understand their changing needs, as proactively solving their problems before they know they have them, and as taking ownership of their problems to ensure successful resolution in as rapid and effective a manner as possible."

In many ways the debate over centralization versus decentralization is a lot like the debates over big government/small government, raise taxes/lower taxes, and federal government versus states' rights. As our recent long debate in California indicates, it requires a complex blend of solutions to solve the complex problems we face. Neither side of a simple dichotomized approach is likely to offer a practical and doable solution to our problems.

We do talk about taking an 'institutional' approach to IT planning and service that's markedly different from either 'centralization' or decentralization. In that approach, the strategic needs of the campus are kept in mind for both local and central decision-making and a premium is put on consultation, feedback, mutual benefit, access, and equity. For a better understanding of the concept of 'institutionalization,' see the link on this topic at [www.csus.edu/irt/strategicplanning](http://www.csus.edu/irt/strategicplanning).

### **How can I be assured the new IT plan meets faculty and student needs?**

The entire intent of the plan is to align IT planning with the primary teaching and learning mission of the university. The initiative for this approach comes from the top, where CSU-wide IT planning has purposefully shifted from a previous focus on

IT infrastructure to a focus on supporting academic needs. In addition, the IT plan follows the vision of our campus-wide strategic plan, wherein a critical focus is provision of the 'best in teaching and learning technologies'. During the development of the new IRT division, it was no accident that the largest support unit created was the Academic Computing Resources group focused on faculty/student needs.

The Steering Committee carefully reviewed survey information about faculty needs for information technology and also took care to ensure those needs were reflected in the IT Strategic Plan. The Committee also understands that this collection of information on faculty/student needs is not a one-time event. That's why collection of information on IT needs and the development of processes to continually improve how we address those needs is built into each section of the IT plan. Both the campus-wide survey of IT values/strengths/weaknesses and the four open forums on IT planning held this spring are evidence of our commitment to this process.

In regard to students, technology services for students have been invigorated over the last year, with the addition of a Student Technology Center, a laptop loan program, expanded and improved computer labs, and an expanded Help Desk. Last year, the CIO cooperated with the ASI to expand study areas and computer labs in the AIRC to 24 hour operation. The CIO is in regular contact with the ASI, having solicited feedback from the ASI Board on the draft IT Strategic Plan just last week.

**Does the plan mean my local IT support that I love is going to be taken away or diminished?**

No, the plan does not impose any changes on your local IT support; decisions about that support will continue to be made by the unit that provides the resources for those IT positions. We are rather trying to find a path that combines the advantages of local IT support (e.g. close to users, timely, nimble) with the advantages of institutional support (e.g. economies of scale, cost-savings through standardization, deeper and broader staff expertise, etc). For example, IRT was able to purchase a large file storage network and server virtualization system that is adequate to provide service to the entire campus. Storage and server management services were then offered to all state-supported units on campus at no cost. Many local IT groups found they could significantly reduce both costs and labor of their IT work by cooperating with the central IT group in use of those services. The local IT group lost no control over its local IT functions in the process, but gained the advantage of the centrally provided IT services that the local group couldn't afford to implement. Such coordination often allows local IT groups to reduce the amount of time spent on repetitive IT tasks, leaving more time for localized needs.

Keep in mind also that there are many information technology services that are only available locally because they are operated primarily by the central IT group. Internet services, classroom support, wireless networking, Help Desk, information security, and accessible technology all fall into this category. Despite the operation

of these functions by the campus-wide IT group, actual implementation of those services across campus would be ineffective if not coordinated with your local IT support units.

One interesting aspect of the IT Steering Committee's survey of the campus was that a large part of the campus was highly satisfied with its local IT support and another significant part was quite dissatisfied. This indicated that there are units that can afford to provide robust local IT support and those that cannot, creating inequities in local support. The IT strategic plan aims to both smooth out these inequities and bring about efficiencies and cost savings that will allow us to make our limited resources go further than they do now.

### **Is the central IT group going to make decisions about our local IT needs for us?**

No. Local needs are best defined locally. That being said, there are advantages in working together to find the best options to meeting those local IT needs. The example of major software purchases can perhaps best make this point. A single department can make a large purchase of software for its computer labs simply by doing a purchase order and installing the software itself. However, the department would miss the significant advantages available from a little advance coordination with an IRT group that provides a free software coordination service. That service can identify accessibility and security issues that have already been addressed for that software, and also might identify existing software already on campus, a lower quantity cost for purchase of the software, or installation/management services available centrally that could save the department significant money.

Another recent real-world experience at Sac State further illustrates the advantages of collaboration. A campus unit purchased a large software application to perform a set of specialized and complex tasks unique to that unit. In the past, that unit would have simply purchased the software and hardware needed and provided staffing to manage all aspects of that software. Coordination in advance with IRT changed this model and provided the unit with the following advantages: 1) No new hardware needed to be purchased, since the unit used centrally provided storage, data base services and virtualized services instead (savings \$10,000-\$20,000); 2) Free assistance was provided with reviewing and clearing the required accessibility of the software; 3) The software and databases were installed by central IT staff with special expertise, at a time when the unit purchasing the software was in the process of filling a single vacant IT position; 4) A major security problem with handling of essential credit card purchases through the software was identified and corrected by central IT staff with expertise in this area; and 5) The local unit continues to exercise local control over all aspects of operation of the software to meet their specialized needs.

**Could you explain the different levels of decision-making about IT on campus? What's the role of the IT Steering Committee?**

The IT Steering Committee has been focused since its inception almost entirely on development of the IT Strategic Plan. It is just beginning to pivot towards its ongoing role of setting strategic direction for IT initiatives, advising on IT policy, and establishing standards for IT priorities. Neither the Steering Committee nor IRT will take over decision-making about the use of IT within individual units across campus. Each division will make its own decisions about its IT needs and about how to allocate its resources to meet those needs. In most cases, individual departments will have to work within their division's procedures for setting priorities and allocating resources.

Each year, the Vice President and Chief Information Officer asks each division head to rank their top priorities for use of campus-wide IT resources. These priorities are collected together and analysis is done to align available IT resources with those priority needs. This is done to ensure that each division's priority needs for IT can be met before other resource commitments are made. Once priorities are set, the IRT division works collaboratively with the other divisions to develop project plans, assign resources from each group and ensure that project goals are met. A complete list of these priority projects can be found at [www.csus.edu/irt/projects](http://www.csus.edu/irt/projects).

Although the role of the IT Steering Committee in this process is still being developed, it is likely the Committee will address the following issues: a) Are the criteria used to rank campus-wide IT priorities appropriate and equitable; b) How will resource conflicts across priorities be resolved; c) Does the resulting list of campus-wide IT projects equitably address needs and meet strategic priorities across campus; d) Is progress on priority projects acceptable and what can be done to improve implementation; and e) are more resources needed?

There are a number of IT issues that must be addressed directly by the central IT group. These include networking (funded and administered by the CSU Chancellor's Office), information security and accessible technology (both mandated by Executive Order), and other IT mandates from the CSU. The IT Steering Committee will be kept apprised of these mandates and centrally directed IT projects, in order for the group to provide advice on how to implement these mandates across campus as equitably as possible.

**What support is going to be provided for IT mandates like CMS that create additional work for our employees?**

In some cases (e.g. networking) central mandates come with resources from the Chancellor's Office that mitigate the impact on campus. But even in the case of networking, where our campus receives more than a million dollars of support annually, there is significant work that accrues to network staff members on campus. In regard to information security and accessible technology, no specific

funding was provided to the campus along with those mandates; instead the campus allocated resources for both functions that are available to support staff.

The largest system mandate in IT, the Common Management System (CMS) implementation of Peoplesoft software, is a different case. At one level, CMS is simply the so-called Enterprise Resource Planning System (ERP) that nearly all higher education campuses use; as such each unit must provide the resources needed for day-to-day operation of that ERP software. During conversion to CMS over the last four years, the campus borrowed millions of dollars to assist units across campus with the extra work required for that implementation. Several millions of dollars in such loans were repaid last year using one-time campus-wide funds approved by UBAC. Following initial implementation of CMS, approximately \$400,000 was transferred from the CMS account to three divisions, to support the additional ongoing work required for use of CMS. CMS implementation was also supported by millions of dollars of spending on external consultants; this model of central support for CMS was not sustainable at the average cost of \$210 per hour. For that reason, most funds used for CMS consulting were repurposed to create IT positions to support users of CMS. These funds were used to create additional training, database, data warehouse, and programmer positions that directly support student, human resources, financial, and academic uses of CMS. This reallocation of consulting funds increased the number of hours of support for CMS available to the campus by up to four times.

Any ERP system like CMS requires regular updates and fixes; every 2-4 years, a major upgrade of particular aspects of the software is typically required. Such upgrades often require extra work by key users of CMS for testing, training, and implementation. The Chancellor's Office provides no central funding to campuses for such work and no funding for this purpose has been provided to IRT. Campuses have put increased pressure on the Chancellor's Office to carefully consider the impact of CMS changes on campus staff. As a result, much more attention has been paid to this issue in recent changes, such as the move to a single Finance module of CMS. However, there are likely to continue to be short-term needs for key CMS users to take on additional work for upgrades and changes. The campus needs to collectively address the issue of whether such work requires additional funding and whether that funding is a priority given other needs.

### **Does the plan mean IT is being reorganized on campus?**

IT services have already been substantially reorganized. A Chief Information Officer position, reporting to the President, was created in early 2007. The IRT division was created in late 2007. The new Academic Computing Resources unit was created as the newest and largest central IT unit and three previously separate administrative computing units were combined into an expanded Administrative Computing Services organization.