The University of Houston, an urban campus of some 30,000 students, has approached the mushrooming demand for information technology support by enhancing its infrastructure and by bringing support closer to the user.

Recently the campus has begun to standardize on several popular productivity tools. While these tools are not the solution for everyone on campus, Netscape, Eudora, and the Microsoft Office suite are favored by a large majority. Standardization allows support providers to become expert in these popular packages.

A major program this year is to replace most faculty workstations below the 486- or Macintosh 68030-level. A similar program for administrative workstations will be initiated in fall 1996. Student workstations in IT laboratories, as well as an NT-based Instructional Support Network of file and print servers, are upgraded annually through funding provided by a student computer use fee.

IT must take bold steps to ensure that user support avoids a crisis. Web development and all of the emerging technologies it encompasses demand a non-traditional support solution. While various IT departments are positioned to provide elements of this support, we are also exploring ways to partner with “cutting-edge” faculty to enrich Web support for the campus.

IT now provides most of its technology support centrally. The UH academic officers recognize that the campus needs far more support. They plan to allocate funds this fall to provide “local” or college-based user support. These support providers will report to, and be coordinated by, the central IT organization, but their duties will be articulated jointly by IT and the participating colleges and departments.

Other major initiatives include establishing an integrated Support and Network Monitoring Center, right-sourcing dial-in support, and migrating support providers from fire fighters to fireproofers. Of all the challenges, the last may be the greatest.

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The Marriott Library of the University of Utah is being forced into massive changes, in terms of both staffing and services. This is strikingly demonstrated by what is occurring in the audio-visual division of Public Services, which is now moving into the library expansion wing as the brand new Multimedia Center (MMC).

Because of the huge increase in expected/demanded services and a dearth of staff, we are trying to institute team management/organization at both the MMC and throughout the entire library. It is only by appropriate, formal sharing of well-trained, expert staff that we can hope to cope with our expanded mission. Working in teams is certainly not a new concept, but it is to this library, especially for teams that integrate career staff and librarians, and support and front-line staff.

Our new MMC organization chart includes one horizontal line of full-time staff who will be responsible for a team—the team leaders. Some will have at least one person as a permanent team member, while others will have no permanent members; they will be responsible for accomplishing their team’s missions and goals and will be evaluated on this primarily. Some will also be temporary members of other MMC and/or library teams, and this will be a secondary but formal responsibility, reflected as one part of their performance evaluation. As an example, the MMC Trainer (who will be responsible for all the center’s technical training of full- and part-time staff) will also be a member of the Library Training Team, probably under the direction, supervision, and evaluation of our Library Instruction Librarian.

This team concept should work in both directions. For example, now that the general reference librarians do not have to be in a print book/index reference area to provide their service, they might work part time in our area as part of the Counter Consultants Team. They could make up for the lack of “content” assistance provided by our part-time and full-time technical specialists. We all would gain very valuable and extremely necessary cross training—they in the technical and electronic area and we in content and evaluation.

All this is supposition, as we will not complete our move until the latter part of September, and the library is still in the midst of major reorganization. We hope that any success of ours in utilizing this shared responsibility concept of flexible teams will be extended throughout the entire organization. I strongly believe that this approach is the only way we can hope to address the changes and challenges facing libraries and higher education in the next several years.

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Weber State University (Ogden, UT) is experiencing a serious support service “crunch.” The problem became particularly noticeable in fall 1995, when Novell’s GroupWise was implemented University-wide and all faculty, staff, and students were given free GroupWise accounts and access to an integrated e-mail directory. It is clear that we are no longer trying to support just the “techno-junkies.” Information technology is now a mainstream user support problem.

Since November 1995, WSU’s Computer Support Center has logged 3,362 formal requests.

for service and has an average backlog of 60–100 unresolved formal requests (this does not include numerous informal requests). We are exploring a number of ways to improve service and cut the backlog, but haven’t found any magic solutions yet!

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At St. Olaf College (Northfield, MN) growth in technology support services has to be accompanied by an associated decrease in another service area. The Academic Computing Center is fortunate, because we know how much time it takes to provide a certain service. Each staff member logs the amount of time each day that is devoted to such things as systems/network management; student, faculty, and staff support; educational services; retail operations; etc. Through careful evaluation of these time logs, we are able to identify the actual amount of time required to provide specific services. Using this information, we can evaluate the value of the service against the staff time involved, the number of individuals served by that service, etc.

One outcome of our ongoing evaluation was the decision to migrate our retail sales operations (computers, peripherals, etc.) to the campus bookstore. While this is a critical service, the bookstore has the expertise, hours, and location far better suited to this operation. Academic Computing will use this opportunity to transform our current retail facility into a walk-in help facility for the community. Another service we will be eliminating is the repair of personally owned microcomputers. Since Northfield does not have a local computer repair business, we have made arrangements with a small company in another city to provide repair services, including free pickup and delivery three times weekly. Individuals will not see any substantial increase in price, but they will see an improvement in the turn-around time on repairs of campus equipment.

Another trick we are using to handle the support crisis is time management training. At least once yearly the staff as a group watches a time-management videotape. We discuss our own time traps, as well as identify the time traps that lurk within the staff. These sessions have been highly effective at increasing our productivity!

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Obviouly we are all going through a support crisis, and I don’t think Pepperdine University (Malibu, CA) is any different than others. There are several important issues facing all of us, including the migration to newer technologies and the integration of these technologies in the teaching/learning environment. The most important new technologies are perhaps those that impact the telecommunications infrastructure. These issues drive our work, and require more to plan, develop, finance, manage, and support than perhaps any other issue that we’ve faced in the past.

There are three items that have proffered that have assisted us in dealing with this support issue:

Technology standards. We have attempted to control some of our support costs by having a clear and well publicized set of hardware and software standards. These are put together with help from our user community, and are enforced at the purchasing office. Standardized technology standards help contain staffing, training, inventory, and R&D costs.

Outsourcing. We have identified various segments of our operation that we regularly outsource. Photocopy maintenance, major cable pulls and dial-up Internet services are examples of opportunities where we have utilized outsourcing to minimize our costs.

Technology management. I’ve always thought that one key way to leverage your staffing resources is to provide them the tools they need to manage the systems they support. Therefore, we have invested and are continuing to invest in system management tools. At the same time, the industry needs to provide better (and less costly) management tools for us.

Finally, as the administrative, academic and technological arenas are pulled closer together, it is becoming more important than ever to develop effective planning and budget models that are collaborative, cohesive, and strategic.

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Information Resources & Technology (IRT) at Bradley University (Peoria, IL) has worked with the University to develop and implement four strategies to address the support crisis:

The IRT Scholar Program: This program annually selects a student to participate in a “forgivable loan” program. For the final two years of the student's program, the University loans full tuition and employs the Scholar as a student assistant. Upon graduation, the Scholar is employed as a full-time entry-level employee. After three years of University employment, the tuition loan is forgiven.

Enhanced use of graduate assistants: We have determined that it is more effective to assign graduate assistants to specific projects rather than to assign them as generalists. Because this approach better meets the needs of all the participants—graduate assistants, IRT staff, and clients—
and provides specific, tangible outcomes, the University has provided additional graduate assistants.

Market parity funding: Bradley salary increases have not kept pace with general market salaries for experienced technical staff. IRT unit managers researched comparable market salaries of high turnover and other “key” positions. Based on this research, IRT was able to persuade administration to provide a limited pool of supplemental funding to address the most serious market parity issues. Factors considered in distributing the funds included criticality of the position, merit-based performance evaluations of the individuals, ability to fill the position should it be vacated, and market parity.

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The University Technology Service Center (UTSC): The UTSC was established in June of 1996 as the help desk for all IRT services. The UTSC will reduce service strain on staff while increasing reliability of service to users. The Remedy Action Response System software will give us a centralized system for managing service calls, and will allow us to provide users with some ability to resolve their own problems, to develop service histories, and to assign service calls to appropriate technical staff.

Winter 1996 Readers Respond Question

Looking ahead to the year 2000, is your institution planning to modify existing information systems to handle the new date, or are you planning to investigate the purchase or development of new applications? What steps have you taken so far to address the “Year 2000” challenge?

Please send your response, along with your name, title, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers by electronic mail to eharris@cause.colorado.edu; by fax to 303-440-0461, or by regular mail to Elizabeth Harris, CAUSE/EFFECT Managing Editor, CAUSE, Suite 302E, 4840 Pearl East Circle, Boulder, CO 80301.

Selected responses to the Winter 1996 Readers Respond question will be printed in the next issue of CAUSE/EFFECT, space permitting. All replies will be included in the online edition available on the CAUSE Web server at http://cause-www.colorado.edu/cause-effect/cause-effect.html