For several years Penn has recognized that external environmental pressures were placing increased constraints on its ability to grow and enhance its academic mission. These pressures caused questions to be raised about the allocation of resources between Schools and the value of support services provided by central administrative offices, and caused the University to examine its administrative structures, processes, and systems. It soon became clear that there needed to be an emphasis on cost containment if resources were to be allocated toward strategic academic priorities. In addition, Penn determined that it needed to improve its information technology infrastructure if it was going to be able to achieve its goals.

The development of a revitalized information infrastructure, which would enable the re-engineering of Penn’s administrative processes, became the focus of Project Cornerstone. Guided by the initial Project Cornerstone work, the University has now acquired the foundation it needs to build the next generation of administrative systems. The primary components of this acquisition include a relational database management system, development tools, and financial application software from Oracle Corporation and UNIX-based server hardware from IBM Corporation.

Signs and portents

The acquisitions announced above signal a profound change in how, and why, business applications will be built. They are the first tangible results of putting a principles-based vision of information architecture to work.* Oracle’s relational database management system (RDBMS) will provide the University with a flexible way to organize and manage data to make it readily available for both operational and planning needs. The RDBMS provides the technical “backbone” for both new business applications and a decision support environment. Oracle’s RDBMS-based financial application software (general ledger, purchasing, and accounts payable) will provide the core of a new financial management environment (FinMIS). Both the RDBMS and FinMIS will significantly enhance Penn’s ability to deal with new and changing business rules and processes.

The future begins

The work of Project Cornerstone has entered a new phase. Finance and ISC staff are finalizing implementation plans for the general ledger, purchasing, accounts payable, and student-data decision support components of Penn’s new administrative environment. Project plans have been drafted; Oracle training has been completed. Now, with the help of senior business officers and information technology representatives throughout the Penn community, Project Cornerstone is documenting the current business practices and the needs of individual Schools, departments, and centers in greater detail.

Oracle user and development licenses will soon be deployed throughout Penn. The RDBMS and development tools will provide each School and center with new technical capabilities to use for its own unique academic or administrative projects. The support structure is still being finalized, with details to be announced before the close of 1994.

For more information about the work of Project Cornerstone, contact Robin Beck (beck@umis.upenn.edu or 898-7581).

* For information about Penn’s principles-based information technology architecture see Making Connections: Building Penn’s electronic future, available from Linda May (may@pobox.upenn.edu or 898-0005).