Penn’s new structure for computing services

November 9, 1996

Why a new model? Computing now touches everyone at Penn. Demand is soaring and Penn’s investment is sure to expand. Those who use and those who provide computing recognize that support can be improved. In the fall of 1995, Penn’s Provost and Executive Vice President appointed a university task force to make computing services easier and more cost-effective for those who use them. The task force has produced a model that will guide organizational change over the next few years. The model doesn’t claim to do everything. It doesn’t ignore history. It is a way of doing business that gives members of the community the chance to make Penn better and exposes each of us to the costs of bad decisions and the benefits of good ones.

The user. The computer user is at the center of our model. Each person should have a local computing “home” and take all computing questions there. Beyond this circle of frontline support are expanding circles of secondary services—provided by the schools, the central computing group, or by outside vendors. But the map of services is irrelevant to the recipient: the frontline support person navigates that landscape for them.

Frontline support. In the model, schools and administrative divisions are responsible for the frontline support of their own members. They can provide it themselves or buy it from each other or from the central computing group, Information Systems and Computing. The task force urges that guidelines for basic levels of frontline support be set and that Penn institutionalize ways of keeping those levels moving up.

Secondary support. Secondary services undergird frontline support and make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The central computing group will provide a more focused and delimited set of secondary services: core administrative systems, networking, data administration and information security, standards, and services for providers of computing. Two new strategies help shape these services:

- Network as a regulated utility. Penn’s network will be run as a regulated public utility—with service-level agreements, campus-wide standards, and a “public utility commission” or campus governing board, to keep it responsive. As a utility, the network will be funded by a mix of allocated and direct charges, with specific funding strategies to be taken up by the governing board. Telephone and video services will be incorporated into this utility structure.

- The market test. The model encourages ISC and others to sell services where markets exist. The intent is to establish, over time, enough of a marketplace to help control costs and encourage a focus on the customer. Small businesses are already found at Penn. Wharton Reprographics, for example, is well known. Such businesses are likely to remain a fairly small part of Penn’s overall economy. They are an important Trojan horse, however, exposing the institution to the discipline of the market and the pressure to please the customer.

Process teams. The model offers a potentially powerful way for Penn to take action at the university level. A few cross-cutting processes will be funded directly and managed across traditional organizational boundaries. For the moment, Penn will concentrate on two or three high priority processes such as academic innovation and student services. These processes can be considered “institutional bets” with high potential payback. As political implications of the process perspective are worked out, more of Penn’s daily life may be organized and funded along process lines.

Costs. Computing is an area of growth and leverage at Penn, one that helps the University save money elsewhere. Penn’s campaign to restructure all core administrative activities, for example, and apply the savings to the academic mission, is largely predicated on the capabilities of modern information systems. From a financial perspective, Penn’s new model for computing has three aims: targeted investment, cost-effectiveness, and greater control for schools and units. The model tries to unite responsibility and authority where they have grown apart, to reveal real costs where they have become obscured, and to return choice to purchasers where it has been eroded.

The future from here. Consultation with leaders of Penn’s units continues. Pilot projects are testing and extending the new model. A steering group guides and coordinates the pilots, laying groundwork for transition. ISC and other units are restructuring in line with the new model.

For more information. For a fuller version of the model, see the project’s Web site (http://www.upenn.edu/computing/restruct/).