THE COMPUTER CENTER'S POTENTIAL AS A COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE TOOL

The Problem Areas Addressed

by

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In considering becoming a purveyor of computing resources and services, one would be well advised to examine and weigh the potential problem areas of the situation.

I will address the topic from the perspective of a state- owned institution with all the applicable restrictions and bureaucratic lethargy thereunto appertaining. This description is given not simply to elicit the half groan, half grin reaction which identifies the presence of suffering kinsmen, but more important to emphasize the unlikelihood of such an institution achieving the attribute of true responsiveness, which is a _sine qua non_ for an organization supplying computing resources and services.

It is paradoxical that computers are used to provide instant information for timely business decisions, yet when a decision involves acquisition of even inexpensive computer equipment, the process of implementation frequently is measured in months. This is an unsatisfactory basis from which to meet service responsibilities.

Although the requirements of supplying computing services exaggerate the impact of such slow reaction time, the problem affects many other areas of the state institution as well. To some extent, institution-related foundations have been created to overcome this problem. Foundations, however, have come under intensive scrutiny recently, and the cure could turn out to be worse than the disease. Another course of action that has been followed is, in effect, to organizationally separate the computing center from the college. Here, the institution would then purchase its computing sevices from the independent center.

The alternatives pursued to achieve the freedom of action necessary to meet the exigencies of day-to-day service activities are just short of drastic.

At this point, one may be inclined to self-examination asking, "Are the benefits worth the cost?", " Why are we getting into this business?", and somewhat more philosophically, "Should we be getting into this business?"

Because it may point to a significant problem area, I would like to explore the last question a bit, leaving the earlier to other speakers.

My greatest apprehension involves a situation in which all of the formidable problems of developing and maintaining a stable customer base have been overcome in an area as defensible as, say, Basic Education (where we are authorized, presently, to provide service), only to receive, subsequently, an order based on a legal interpretation of the Attorney General, directing us to "get out of the business." This is not that unlikely when one considers that a private computer service bureau might argue that taxes coming from its profits are being used to procure public computing resources which are, in turn, being used to create unfair competition with that company which could result in its collapse. The filial relationship between Basic Education and Higher Education is at best tenuous, at least in Pennsylvania. Private companies already provide computing services to Basic Education. Public institutions which are not taxed, which are not required to show a profit and which are often given educational discounts resulting in lower costs for their computer equipment are, in fact, competing

with private industry. One might argue that such competition is unfair.

The resolution of this problem poses for each institution, moral, ethical, legal, and perhaps contractual questions. As you know, many educational allowances are predicated upon computer utilization being restricted to the immediate business of the academic institution and often expressly prohibit extra-college use.

In the absence, at the state level, of a clear statement of mission supportive of this concept, service programs are vulnerable to the constantly changing political climate which may, at some point, wax unsupportive and effect their demise.

One of the major problems facing the emergence of state college support to Basic Education in Pennsylvania is the question of governance. It is not unlikely, with a major portion of the Basic Education community obtaining computing services from the State Colleges, that within a short time, the lion's share of costs will be borne by Basic Education. The question, obviously raised in anticipation of second-class citizenship status with first-class citizenship invoices, has already been asked, "Should not Basic Education properly have the lion's share in the governance of such a facility?" What President will abrogate his authority over his college's computing resource? Alternatively, why shouldn't the tail wag the dog if it constitutes the vastly greater portion? -- a dilemma to be sure!

This raises yet another problem area, namely, transitory contractual relationships. In the absence of legislation binding Basic Education to Higher Education for computing services, the commitment to larger equipment and larger staffs to support what may be a disproportionate extra-college clientele is frought with danger. Experience of networks suggests that often a customer breaks free to form his own computing facility after a brief weaning period. The extremely exciting developments in computing hardware in which substantial real memory and disc storage capabilities are available at extremely low cost also contribute to the potential perfidy of existing customers. This problem is almost insurmountable or of small consequence depending upon whether an institution is purveying resources or services, respectively. By "services" is meant something approaching a total information system. For to extricate oneself from such an entanglement borders on the impossible. Therefore, such a condition is much to be sought after in establishing a stable customer base.

A final consideration involves the institution's ability to address its changing requirements while contractually committed to the individual members of its customer base. This condition makes extremely difficult the opportunity to undertake major conversion efforts that would otherwise benefit the institution. That is to say, one would be restricted under most circumstances to the meagerest modifications of the operating system, language processors, and other supporting software. Such restrictions could become an expressway to obsolescence resulting in the eventual collapse of the customer base.

All in all, the problems confronting the state-owned computing service supplier are most formidable and the faint-hearted should not enter there.