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Brad Englert
Interim Chief Operating Officer
Information Technology Services
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Dear Brad,

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts about the issues currently facing ITS in this open letter. I started writing this letter before your appointment as Interim Chief Operating Officer. The issues it addresses have existed for several months. Now that you've had a few weeks to get settled in, I hope that you will have the time to consider what I have to say.

Most of the problems we face in the administrative computing environment result from past failures of leadership and vision, but we've been treating them as technology issues. By treating them in this way we could easily create real technology issues and will leave the true problems unresolved. I ask that you seek to address the cultural, social, and leadership issues before proceeding with technological changes.

Let me begin with the efforts to plan for a migration off the mainframe to some open systems platform. I feel that these efforts originated in an attempt to cover up a failure to adequately budget for a mainframe upgrade by recasting it as a problem with mainframe technology. For example, I've heard expressions like "IBM has a gun to our heads" quite often. It's true that IBM has become the sole source for zArchitecture hardware, and some of the things they do to maximize revenues from their "locked in" customers are questionable. However, we can't really blame IBM for what actually comes down to a planning failure (or failure to plan) by ITS management. Also, IBM has not really treated the University as a "locked in" customer and has offered us significant discounts from their list pricing.

To be clear, I have no fundamental objection to migrating off the mainframe. For several years I've advocated that we develop a plan to do so and I've promoted application designs that would make a migration easier. If we have a coherent vision for what we want our administrative computing infrastructure to become, and mainframe technologies do not contribute to that vision, by all means let's move on. But let's not do it under false pretenses, or based on unrealistic expectations for future savings, especially when most of the costs of the migration will be borne not by ITS but by developers in other departments and by our end users.

There are good reasons to suspect that the University would not, in fact, see any cost savings from a migration within a reasonable time frame. Dennis Klenk entered our numbers into a Clerity-provided spreadsheet a couple of years ago, and that indicated a negative return on investment within its five-year time span. Our talks with Software AG have pointed in the same

direction. These results have been dismissed as “back-of-the-envelope calculations,” but there's no evidence that they’re very far off. When you consider consultant costs, staff time and retraining, the purchase of new hardware and software for the replacement platform, and the opportunity costs from using these resources for the migration rather than something else of benefit to the University, it will clearly take years of lower hardware and licensing costs before we’ll come out ahead.

I also feel uncomfortable about the mainframe efficiency push. Efforts to use our existing mainframe more efficiently are all to the good; promoting efficiency is an important part of the job of the Administrative Services Support group. There are clearly opportunities to modify the scheduling of some processes, to eliminate costly but little used functionality, and to tighten up application code that could extend the useful life of our existing system for several months. However, we should not harbor any illusions that these changes are anything more than a delaying tactic, and even if we proceed with a migration we will need a more capable mainframe to get us through the transition. Eventually we’ll reach a point of diminishing returns, when the programming effort to achieve a small efficiency gain costs more than what the improved efficiency buys. Inevitably, at some point our end users will need more capacity than what we currently have; if we don’t provide it they will find other means to meet their business needs that will cost the University more than a centralized, automated solution.

In conclusion, we shouldn’t be looking for technical solutions to problems that really result from a lack of leadership. Before we make sweeping changes to our technology infrastructure or get bogged down in a never-ending pursuit of trivial efficiency improvements we need a long term, strategic vision of what the administrative computing function at the University should be. Please lead us in the development of that vision.

Sincerely yours,

Curtis Pew