

The Score

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The monthly review of the Oberlin Project for Unified Systems for the staff and faculty of Oberlin College

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The future is coming: OPUS and IT at OC

In the February 28, 1997 issue of *The Observer*, Director of Computing John Bucher wrote an article outlining the "service-support crisis" in information technology (IT). In illustrating this crisis, Bucher described the "insatiable service demands" of computer users in higher education, noting that "although we could imagine a solution in which every user had a personal service technician, even this situation couldn't adequately cover the diversity of computer usage or provide adequate coverage in times of vacation and illness."

Nine months later, Bucher's comments have a significance that the Oberlin College community could not have foreseen when his article was published, since OPUS will have—and is having—a very real impact on the "service crisis" that he described. Appropriately enough, his article included the following observation: "The service crisis Oberlin faces today probably wouldn't exist if the campus were not networked...The connectivity between computer users and the information the users wish to access is what drives the infusion of IT."

This observation is particularly compelling because OPUS represents the ultimate in that "connectivity." OPUS will eventually mean the use

of a system that connects people and information in ways that the College has never experienced. That connectivity represents a great benefit to the College, but also represents a potential threat to a campus already suffering from the service-support crisis Bucher outlined in that February article.

the need for support

The support crisis at Oberlin is nothing new, and it's nothing that is unique to Oberlin. Furthermore, it has less to do with the number of support staff than with the number of requests for help; Bucher points out that even at full staff—or double or triple staff—the Computing Center could never fully accommodate every request in the time frame desired by the user. Adding to that is the fact that administrators at colleges and universities around the country are finding it increasingly difficult to find qualified candidates to fill IT positions at the salary levels offered in higher ed. This is especially true for those positions involving programming support and network management.

For example, when Don Hilton, the DOS support technician in the Computing Center, left in May of '97, the Center searched for more than five months for his replacement. According to Bucher, the applicants simply weren't there, perhaps due in part to the College's fairly restrictive salary range. Joe Palmieri, former Director of Computing and Professor of Physics, notes that some faculty members were frustrated by the delay in finding a replacement and the subsequent lack of support for faculty using PC's.

It's an understandable frustration, one that is felt by the Computing Center and administrative staff as well as the faculty. "The stresses of IT staffing shortages affect the entire campus and all of the planned projects, not just academic projects," points out Monica Wachter, OPUS Project Manager. And how does OPUS affect the College's computing resources? "It's

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*Director of
Computing
John Bucher*



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important to note that most of the resources that are dedicated to OPUS would already be dedicated to administrative computing even if OPUS never existed," Wachter notes, "because we would have expended equivalent resources to maintain the status quo."

Furthermore, Bucher points out that even without OPUS, the Computing Center can only do its best to accommodate the needs of the campus—and even "its best" is not going to satisfy everyone. "The requests for support are absolutely overwhelming," Bucher says, "both in terms of sheer volume and the diversity of issues and needs. There is incredible pressure to do more, do it differently, do it quicker. We're absolutely swamped by technological demands on this campus, and every time a piece of software needs to be updated for the curriculum, or a new professor or administrator comes on board, there are new issues and new demands."

fitting OPUS in

So how does OPUS fit into all those issues and requests? "Well, I'm not sure it fits in as much as it fits on top of," laughs Bucher. "Our challenge with OPUS is to find the balance. We need to make sure that the changes associated with the migration don't make it impossible for our current systems to operate and that support for academic computing doesn't stagnate."

Finding balance also means educating the College community as to why OPUS is such a priority at all. BANNER and the auxiliary software associated with OPUS are primarily geared towards administrative work rather than academic instruction, and Palmieri notes that a concern amongst the College faculty is that OPUS seems so driven towards business and not education.

Bucher understands this concern. "A professor's job is to teach, not be an administrator. Oberlin's primary goal is and always has been getting students into classrooms and providing them with an A-one education," says Bucher firmly. "But everyone on this campus needs to understand that there's an entire framework that gets those students into the classroom in the first place. Registration, paying

bills, assigning dorm rooms, dealing with requirements... granted, these aren't the kind of things that Plato had in mind, but Plato never had to register a student."

"We are an institution, an organization with necessary administrative functions," Bucher continues. "OPUS will improve those functions. It will enhance the business end of the College. We all know the difference between a place that has its act together on the business end and one that doesn't, and the one that does is ultimately more successful in reaching its primary goal. Education is our primary goal here, and that education needs to be supported mechanically and administratively. That's what OPUS will accomplish."

autonomy in utopia

While the OPUS teams are working to accomplish that goal, the problem of the service support crisis is still an issue. The problem is that there may be no viable solution to the kind of support crisis currently occurring in higher education. "The user ideal, what I call the 'utopian model,' is basically one support person per user," Bucher observes. "When users have a problem, they want someone who can come running right that minute to fix it. Hey, I'm the same way. If my printer breaks, I want it fixed now. But for obvious reasons, the utopian model doesn't work—it's just not sustainable."

Obviously, adding staff to the Computing Center will alleviate some of the problem, and the Center has had some success in meeting that need. With the hiring of Lisa Godbolt to replace Don Hilton, the Computing Center is fully staffed for the first time in over three years. But as Bucher points out, there will never be enough staff to populate the utopian model of user support. "The other part of the solution is self-sufficiency on the part of users," Bucher says. "We need to educate users to become more autonomous, practice more self-reliance, and in part, that's where OPUS will help. OPUS clearly supports the model of user autonomy, because the new system will allow users greater access to the information they need."

Professor Palmieri, however, points out the other side of the

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opus notes

The Score takes December off

Due to the holiday season and Winter Shutdown, *The Score* will not publish a December issue. The next issue of *The Score* will be available the third week of January and will focus on the Office of Human Resources' production cutover, scheduled for January 1, 1998. Both current and past issues of *The Score* are available online at <<http://www.oberlin.edu/~acs/score.htm>>. ■

New resources on OPUS Web site

OPUS has added several new features to its World Wide Web site. Users can now access Frequently Asked Questions about the project (updated periodically) and the OPUS Glossary, which defines the computer

terminology associated with the project. Other features of the site include access to the meeting minutes of ACAC, the OPUS timeline and training schedule, and links to SCT BANNER and the FAMIS project. The OPUS site's Web address is <<http://www.oberlin.edu/~acs/opushome.htm>>. Comments about the OPUS website are encouraged; send questions and suggestions to OPUS@oberlin.edu. ■

Student Records goes to work

The BANNER Student Records module is underway. So far, two functional training trips with SCT Consultant Sandra Bealac have been completed, with the most recent trip taking place November 3-6. The Student Records team has also attended BANNER

navigational training taught by OPUS Communications Manager Ami Berger. According to Lori Gumpf, College Registrar and the team leader for the Student Records implementation, the training trips have been an "eye-opener...it was necessary to get people to really think about how BANNER is going to work." ■

OPUS means new paychecks

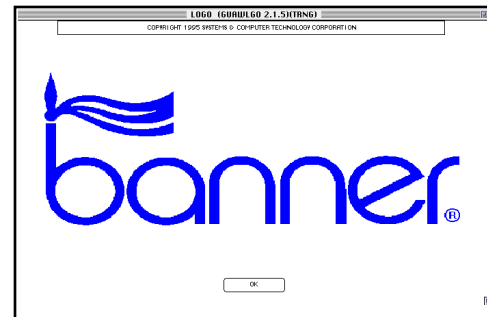
When the Office of Human Resources goes live on BANNER, the look of College paychecks will change. Because of BANNER's increased capacity for integrated data, there will be different financial information included on the new checks. The new checks are scheduled to make their debut appearance next year. ■

banner preview

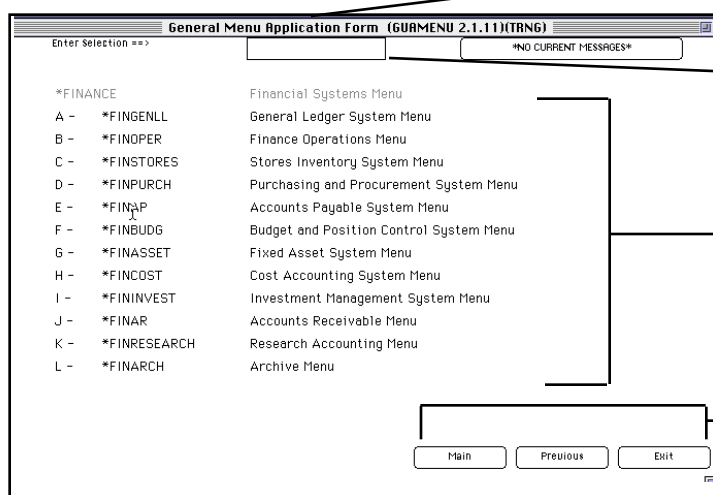
A sneak preview of BANNER

BANNER: you've been hearing about it, reading about it, maybe even stressing out about it. But so far, not many people on campus have had the chance to do any looking at it.

Here's your chance. Below, we've reproduced examples of the two kinds of screens in BANNER--a menu and a form--and provided some words of wisdom on each of the parts of the screens.



This is an example of a **BANNER menu**. In BANNER, a menu is a screen that gives you a list of places you can go. You do not enter information into menus.



This is your **title bar**. The name of the menu is listed here. This particular menu is called GUAMENU.

This is your **selection box**. In BANNER menus, you can type in the name of the form you need in the selection box and BANNER will take you directly to the form.

These are your **menu selections**, lists of other menus (and sometimes forms) that you can go to from this menu. Menus are always identified by an asterisk next to the name in the middle column.

These are your **buttons**. They are the dynamic portion of BANNER, and clicking on them moves you around the system.

A familiar sight: your **title bar**. Both menus and forms have them. The title of this form is SPAIDEN: it's the general person identification form in the Student Records module.

This is a **BANNER form**. Forms are screens where you actually retrieve and enter data into the system.

More **buttons**. In the forms, you'll find buttons all over your screen, not just at the bottom as in menus.

This is an **area line**. BANNER uses area lines to separate the areas of your form. Each area is called a **block**.

These rectangular spaces in each block are your **fields**. A field is the space where you enter and/or retrieve data. These particular fields are where a person's name information would be stored in the system.

Buttons, buttons everywhere. The buttons on the bottom of the form will take you to different menus and different forms.

opus profile

Finance team leader and Assistant Controller Pearl Lin, SCT Trainer Evonne Walters and Accounting Supervisor Jim Klaiber relax after a day of training on BANNER.



Finance's great "adventure"

With all the hustle and bustle of Human Resources going live in about six weeks, it's easy to forget that other OPUS teams are working hard to meet their own BANNER deadlines. The Finance team—headed by Assistant Controller Pearl Lin—has just completed their sixth functional training trip with SCT Senior Finance Consultant Evonne Walters. Like their colleagues across the hall in Human Resources, the Finance team (made up of staff from both Purchasing and the Controller's Office) is busily preparing for production cutover, scheduled for July 1, 1998.

Unlike the HR staff, however, the folks in Finance were not necessarily thrilled with the decision to move to BANNER. Whereas the old Human Resources system was failing to meet the needs of the staff, the Finance system (known as the FRS system) was serving its users just fine. "FRS was working fine and meeting our needs," says Lin, "and we found no pressing reason for our group to make a change in software. But we knew the change was necessary for the college as a whole in order to have a campus-wide, fully integrated system."

Andrew Evans, VP for Finance, also acknowledges the weight of the decision to move to the new system. "The implementation of BANNER is an enormous undertaking," notes Evans, adding that it is "one which we undertook after great discussion and a little

trepidation."

Now that the team is in the midst of the implementation, however, the Finance team is becoming more aware of the enhancements that BANNER will bring. These include the benefits of an integrated Purchasing/Accounts Payable system, which the office has never had and which will greatly streamline operations. The team also hopes to implement on-line viewing capabilities for departmental budgets, which would be a time-saver for the Controller's office as well as administrative and academic offices around campus.

In addition, Lin is looking forward to upgrading her office's computing equipment, a necessity for running the BANNER software, and is also enthusiastic about the benefits of the operations analysis that her office participated in: "we learned from the operations analysis that some departments are doing duplicate work around campus," Lin notes, "and we really should try to avoid this."

Evans also stresses the benefits of BANNER's ability to connect users to each other: "From the beginning, I think there was widespread agreement that we really need better systems," he observes, "and more importantly, we needed systems that could communicate with each other directly." The system should also make Oberlin's strategic planning more effective: "BANNER hopefully will provide a better way to prepare annual operating budgets and alternative financial planning scenarios," says Budget Director Bob Knight. "The current system is very cumbersome and time consuming, and leaves little time for true planning."

The future benefits of BANNER are one thing, but right now the team is focused on handling the challenges of the present. "Due to the complexity of BANNER, the implementation has been difficult and time-consuming," Lin says, "and in the meantime, I'm still handling regular, non-BANNER activities in the Controller's office. It's a real challenge."

Evans is very much aware of those challenges. "There is no question that the implementation of any major system is a tremendous amount of work," Evans says. "I know people are spending much time on this as well as completing their normal work. For this I am very appreciative and impressed with the willingness of a great many of my colleagues to embark on this 'adventure'." ■

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autonomy coin. "Some professors want to be too autonomous," he observes. "Maybe they want to run some software that the Computing Center can't support, or run a server on their own computer rather than having the Center do it. But then when they run into problems, they need the Center to support them and fix the problem."

advantages, tradeoffs

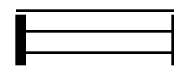
In addition, Palmieri notes that many faculty see OPUS as unnecessary. "Many professors have a 'if it's not broken, why fix it?' attitude about administrative computing," Palmieri says. "They're wondering if it's really going to make a difference to them."

Will OPUS make a difference to faculty, and by association, to students? Of course:

OPUS will fundamentally change the way Oberlin delivers its services, and that change will inevitably affect how teaching and learning is done here. It is unpopular in academe to think of institutions of higher education as businesses, but in a sense, any college must be business-like in its operations. As Palmieri points out, "we've got to pay our bills, we've got to meet our payroll, we've got to keep good records. OPUS is not a 'choice'; I think we have to do it."

And Bucher seems to think we're doing it as well as can be expected. "The project is going about as smoothly as a migration can go," he says. "As long as people have an understanding that there will be tradeoffs for the next few years, we're going to work our hardest to make sure they see the advantages in the end." ■

The
Score



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