

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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March 19-22, 2000
SCT Summit 2000,
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feature

Just the VAX, ma'am: The clock ticks on a legacy

For many of the College staff who currently use BANNER, nostalgia can be summed up in one word: VAXC.

Okay, maybe it's not really a word, but the VAXC is the machine that most Oberlin College legacy systems were housed on, and it touched almost everyone who used a computer at Oberlin: Human Resources, the Controller's Office, all the Student Records offices, and even students, who used the VAXC to register for courses before PRESTO came along. Oberlin used the VAXC for administrative record-keeping, generating reports and labels, e-mail—and now that most staff have moved away from the VAXC, people refer to it longingly and sometimes indignantly, as in “well, I did it that way on the VAX!”

Traces of the VAX remain on the Oberlin campus, even though the other two incarnations (the VAXA and VAXB) are long gone. Financial Aid, for example, is still using its legacy system on the VAX to process applications since the office won't fully go live on BANNER until spring of 2001. And there are still a few ancillary systems

scattered around campus that utilize the VAX, but these ancillary systems are few and far between. The eight-year-old VAX is headed towards complete retirement—and according to the CIT, that retirement is probably overdue.

defining “old”

Although an eight-year-old person is still very much a youngster, an eight-year-old computer like the VAX is practically a dinosaur when it comes to upkeep and repair. Remember the computer that was on your desk eight years ago? You'd probably rather not.

“The hardware and software on the VAX are quite old,” says Jane Zuzek, Computer Systems Manager in the CIT. “It's getting more difficult to find replacement parts when we suffer hardware problems, and the repair time is increasing,” she says. “There's a potential that we could suffer an unrecoverable hardware problem. Additionally, we spend a lot of money each year—around \$18,000 annually—to keep the VAX on hardware maintenance.”

Those issues are a part of the reason that the College made the decision to move to BANNER in the first place. Since the VAX was becoming more and more outdated, it was necessary to make a difficult choice about administrative computing—spend a ton of time and money on a vendor package (like BANNER) or spend a ton of time and money on writing an in-house system—for every department on campus. When the decision was made to move to a vendor package, it was agreed by all that eventually the VAX would have to be completely unplugged.

Financial Aid—unplugged?

Unfortunately, real life has gotten in the way of
continued on page 2...

A blast from the past, at right: administrative computing screens like this one, from the legacy SR system on the VAX, are fast becoming just a memory at Oberlin.

Oberlin College		Address		SR2F0013	
ID Number:	988-	Name: Jessica Rose Taylor			
Contact Code:	01	Permanent Home:	X	Billing:	Emergency: Parent:
		Second Parent:	Parent Work:	Mailing:	
Name: L:	Taylor	F:	Jessica	M:	Rose
		S:	P:		
Address Line 1:					
Address Line 2:	210 Elm Street				
Address Line 3:					
City:	Oberlin				
State:	OH				
Zip:	44074-				
Country:					
Phone:	- -				
Default Contact Codes: 01 - Permanent Home, 02 - Billing if not 01, 03 - Emergency if not 01, 04 - Parent, 05 - Parent Work, 06 - Mailing (FR Office only), 07 - Second Parent					

...feature

...continued from page 1

that unplugging, since Financial Aid continues to rely on the VAX for processing. "Unplugging the VAX is tentatively scheduled for October, 2001," says OPUS Project Manager Monica Wachter. "Since the machine is being used primarily to keep Financial Aid up and running, they'll need to be completely live on BANNER and have retrieved all 2000-2001 reporting data from the VAX before that can happen."

The fact that Financial Aid is still dependent on the VAX for everyday processing does make Wachter nervous. "The VAX needs to be put to rest because its operating system and version of Oracle are outdated and no longer supported by any kind of maintenance agreement," she points out. "Also, the hardware itself is now considered old technology, so that while it could stay running for quite awhile, its usefulness deteriorates by the week."

The danger here, Wachter says, is that in the case of a major system failure, the resources may not be available to fix a down-for-the-count VAX: "If there is a failure, any resources required to fix it may not be available at all or could be prohibitively expensive," she says. "That could mean a suspension of automated processing for Financial Aid for an extended period of time." For her part, Wachter is very much looking forward to getting the office off the VAX and onto the BANNER module of Financial Aid. The office begins work on the implementation in April of 2000, will go live with some functions in October of 2000, and expects to be completely off the legacy system by spring of 2001.

"Most users are prepared for the VAX's requiem," says Wachter. "By the time of the formal decommissioning, many users will already be referring with nostalgia to 'the days of the VAX'."

requiem for the VAX

Financial Aid isn't the lone holdout on the VAX, of course; there is still a good deal of data still living on the old machine. The legacy Student Records system continues to be available for historical inquiries, and the same is true of the legacy Human Resources and Finance systems. The Computer Store has recently moved from its old system on the VAX to a new system called POSIM, but old inventory and purchase data is still on the VAX, waiting for a final cleanup. There are also many historical files, including institutional research data, that needs to be archived or otherwise moved off the VAX before that final unplug can occur.

But for everyday processing, the days of the VAX have pretty much already come to an end. Zuzek notes that at this point, no one should be sending or receiving e-mail via the VAX. The CIT has identified a few places where the VAX needs to be kept up and running, and these functions are currently working towards ending their reliance on the old machine.

Zuzek also points out that offices need to look closely at their procedures to make sure something critical isn't still coming off the VAX. "If someone is using the VAX for ancillary functions—like producing labels—and these functions have not been addressed by CIT, then these people need to find alternative solutions for their needs," Zuzek says.

"Most users are already prepared for the VAX's requiem," says Monica Wachter. "I expect that by the time of the formal decommissioning, many users will already be referring with nostalgia to 'the days of the VAX'." ■

opus notes

BANNER helps speed up W2's

If you're thinking that you received your W-2 earlier than usual this year, you're right. According to Assistant Controller Marcia Miller, College employees received their W-2's earlier this year than any other year in recent memory. Miller credits BANNER in part for the quick turnaround. "Processing W-2's in BANNER is much faster than our legacy system was," Miller says. "The entire process is simpler, and it's a real relief to be in the middle of January and already have the W-2's finished." ■

Viewing grades on PRESTO

Students are now able to view their course grades online for the first time. Since January 14, students have been able to log into PRESTO to see their first-semester grades. This represents a major shift in College procedure, as hard-copy grade mailers will no longer be sent to students. "Providing Internet

access to grades will ultimately benefit all involved," says Lori Gumpf, registrar. "Web registration and grade display—just two of the many features of PRESTO—are intended to add flexibility and improve the efficiency of these processes for the students." Unlike the registration feature of PRESTO, which can only be used during designated registration windows, students can access their grades at any time. ■

Y2K brings a few BANNER bugs

The rollover to the year 2000 was fairly quiet worldwide, and only produced a few small problems in the BANNER software. One glitch appeared in BANNER's letter generation function, which stalled some Admissions processing on January 3. SCT, the company that makes BANNER, provided a fix that allowed normal processing to resume on January 4, 2000.

In addition, the A/R module, which

processes student billing, needed some last minute updating before January 1. These updates were applied over Winter Shutdown by David Foos, Analyst/Programmer, and Darrick Strange, Database Administrator, in order for the module to be ready for the rollover to 2000. ■

Mocks will test BANNER and PRESTO upgrades

A series of mock registrations in January and February will test the upgrade to the BANNER Student Records module, which has been applied to a "practice" database. A web update has also been applied to a test version of PRESTO. The mock registrations will test a number of functions in PRESTO, including the seat reservation function, which has caused problems in the past. To participate in a mock registration, email Ami Berger at ami.berger@oberlin.edu. ■

BANNER Banter: Enlarging the font in the forms

Ever notice how gosh-darn *small* the font is in BANNER? When users first begin to work with BANNER, many complain that it's even more of a challenge just to see the teeny-tiny font than to actually learn how to use the system! If your eyes are begging you for a bigger BANNER font, there's a simple way to make the data bigger: Here's how:

Enlarging BANNER fonts

Step 1: Make sure that you can see the ORAforms icon on your desktop (if you can't, open BANNER on your machine to put it there).

Step 2: Open your hard drive, look for your System Folder, and double-click to open it.

Step 3: In your System Folder, locate the folder called Preferences. Open this folder, and look for the item called "Oracle Font Aliases" (it's a SimpleText document). Click ONCE on the name of the document to highlight it, and then rename the document "Oracle Font Aliases Old". Leave the Preferences folder open as you complete the next step.

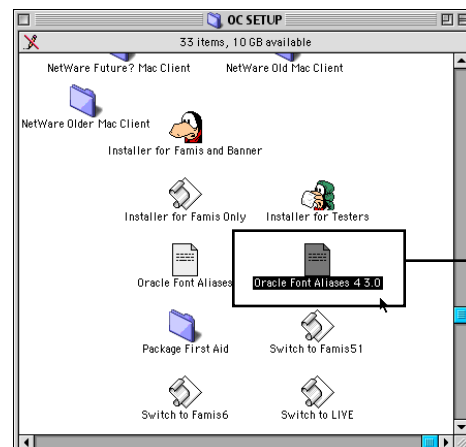
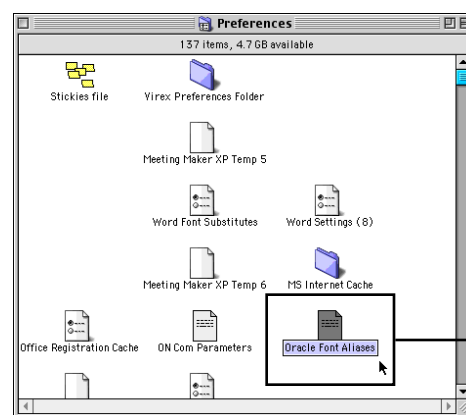
Step 4: Now double-click on the ORAforms icon that's on your desktop. Scroll down until you see the folder called "OC Setup". Open this folder.

Step 5: In the OC Setup folder, there will be a file called "Oracle Font Aliases 4 3.0". Drag this file over to your Preferences folder; this will save a copy of the file to be saved in your Preferences.

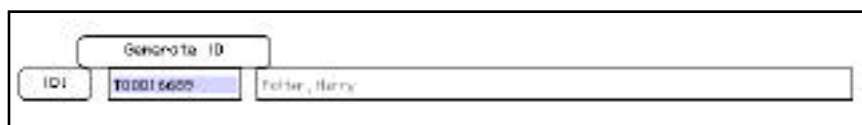
Step 6: Close the OC Setup folder and exit out of the ORAforms menu.

Step 7: Now, go back into your Preferences folder and change the name of the "Oracle Font Aliases 4 3.0" to "Oracle Font Aliases".

Step 8: Close the Preferences folder. Now, the next time you use BANNER, you should see bigger fonts in your forms, as shown below.



The key block of SPAIDEN
with the smaller fonts...



...and with the fonts enlarged.



Admissions update: OC Class of '04 gets BANNERized

Going live on BANNER is difficult enough, but *being* live on BANNER is another thing entirely. That's what the staff in the College and Conservatory Admissions Offices are learning this winter. As the admissions cycle heats up, those who are working to put together Oberlin's class of '04 are contending with thousands of applications as well the task of getting used to an entirely new way of processing those applications.

"We're just entering and entering as fast as we can," says College Admissions Office Manager Maryann Stillwell. "Our data entry staff is spending a good amount of time just getting the data into the system." Because this is the office's first year on BANNER, several temps have been hired to help support the data entry staff. The same is true for the Conservatory Admissions office: Michael Manderen, Director of Conservatory Admissions, reports that Alice Davis, the office's one Administrative Assistant, is also getting some extra support this season. "Alice, who is known locally as 'Wonder Woman,' has many other equally important duties," Manderen says, noting that the office has hired a temp to make Davis' data entry duties more manageable.

the work pays off

Having worked feverishly to get BANNER up and running in time for the beginning of the cycle, both offices are starting to see that hard work paying off. "Apps are getting in the system, letters are being generated—the work is getting done," Stillwell says. For his part, Manderen is enthusiastic about some of the possibilities BANNER offers in the way of analyzing admissions data. "Generally speaking, BANNER has created some tantalizing new possibilities for flexible analysis of our admissions data," Manderen says. "This can be done primarily through the creation of the admissions reporting 'views' and the adoption of the wonderful new BrioQuery reporting tool, which can 'sit on top' of the BANNER data."

Aaron Milenski, Senior Assistant Director for College Admissions, is also a BrioQuery fan: "I'm finding it easy to use and I like the functions that are available," Milenski reports. "I can produce lists for people and download them into Excel, and produce statistics faster than I could before."

There is also praise for the way in which reporting has been moved from the legacy system to BANNER. "Due to an enormous amount of advance planning and the work of several programmers in the CIT, we are in fact getting what we need in terms of reports from BANNER," Stillwell reports. She points out that this was no accident: work began months ago to lay out office-wide and campus-wide needs in terms of reports, labels, cards, and other output. "I am simply amazed at the amount of time and effort it took to get us to this point with the reporting," Stillwell says.

Manderen is also satisfied with the reporting that has been developed out of BANNER: "With the outstanding cooperation of the staff in the CIT, we have been able to develop replacement reports

for all of our essential legacy admissions reports," Manderen says, "and we've also developed a whole new arsenal of nifty new applications and reports, many of which may be 'tweaked' extensively on the desktop."

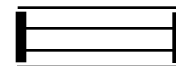
the data entry blues

So everything is hunky-dory with admissions, right? Well, not quite. "Data entry in BANNER still takes much too long," Stillwell says frankly. "It's very frustrating for staff who are used to taking less than a minute to enter an application to have it now take twice as long." In the Conservatory, data entry time is also an issue: "I expect that as we gain experience, processing functions such as creating labels, downloading files, various reports, forms, letters, etc., will become more routine, and thus take less effort and time," says Manderen, "but I know we will never match the data entry turn-around of our old system."

These concerns are well-known to the Administrative Computing Services group in the CIT. "We are very much aware of the data entry concerns for Admissions," says Project Manager Monica Wachter, "and we're looking at ways to try and ease the strain on the data entry staff." Wachter reports that ACS is looking at a few potential strategies, which include different BANNER forms for data entry and working with SCT on ways to incorporate faster data entry procedures into the Admissions piece of the system.

In the meantime, the Admissions staff continues to work on the class of 2004, and continues to get used to working on Planet BANNER. Stillwell is also working to keep the changes associated with the new system in perspective: "Considering all the problems that we could be having with BANNER," she says with a smile, "we're doing quite well." ■

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