22 July 2003

Re: ITS's Recent Actions

Dear President Osgood, Vice-President Swartz, and Faculty Chair Montgomery,

Today I learned the surprising news that (1) ITS has decided to change campus computing policy to disallow, among other things, online communities at Grinnell that also involve alums, and (2) ITS has decided to disconnect the Plans service on campus with less than five hours notice. I am writing to you because these actions seem to violate many core aspects of Grinnell.

Computing Policies

I find the change in computing policy concerning not only because of the particulars, but also because it violates faculty governance at Grinnell. Faculty, not bureaucrats, should be making the decisions as to what and what not is acceptable computing at Grinnell. At minimum, it should be a group decision. When I arrived at Grinnell, the Computing Committee (composed of faculty, students, and ITS staff) would have updated policy. The Instructional Support Committee now should have control of that policy, and for major changes like that, student voices should also be involved.

I also find it concerning that the new policy and the forthcoming ITS “Blog” do not seem to include alums. One of the key aspects of Plans (as discussed below) is that it connect alums and current students.

Finally, I find it particularly concerning that the new policy includes the phrase “[t]he content of any student or student group virtual community must not be viewable by non-members of that community, either directly or via internet [sic] search engines”. One of the core values of the Grinnell community, and of any academic community, is the open sharing of ideas, opinions, and information. Telling people that they cannot share more broadly violates that core value.
Plans

Let us now turn to the other, related, action, the expulsion of Plans. In case you aren’t aware, Plans is an online community of students, faculty, staff, and alums. Members of the community post their thoughts, diaries, comments, whatever. Plans also allows participants to easily link to other participants’ plans and to find out who links to their own plans. Long dialogs across different plans often develop. Community members also meet new people by following plan links.

Plans is one of the leading Web services available on campus, one that was designed developed by Grinnell students. Plans currently has over 1400 participants. During the academic year, it receives over two hits per second.

Plans connects people: Current students use it to post their thoughts and to plan their events, alums use it to stay in touch with each other, and current students and alum use it to meet each other. (Where else but Grinnell would a alum bring presents back to students she had never met?) I hear that many students and alums use Plans when they are away from campus as a way of staying in touch and a way of finding out info on their colleagues. On a more personal level, Plans has put me in touch with a number of students I might never have otherwise met, and has even given me the chance to advise some.

Plans plays an important role in the Grinnell community: During the spring crisis, many students turned to Plans for comfort, for connection, for news, and even just to vent.

ITS says that it expects to install a new “blog” as a replacement for plans. However, the elimination of Plans before the enabling of the replacement is completely inappropriate, given how widely-used the service is. The timing is also extremely bad. How would campus feel if ITS turned off email or Web services for a month or two, with less than five hours notice, promising “we’ll have a replacement in the fall”?

Good software engineering practice suggests that you not discard a working, if imperfect, piece of software before you fully install its replacement. In fact, until the new “blog” is in place, it is impossible to tell whether it is an adequate replacement. The user interface of Plans is surprisingly well developed.

I understand that ITS claims that it “will work with students and other members of the campus community to ensure that this product meets the needs and serves the interests of the campus community.” However, ITS is notably slow to repair software problems. For example, it took over a year to roll out Outlook Web Access, and it has taken over six months to fix some simple reported bugs (e.g., OWA’s inability to schedule appointments in anything but half-hour intervals). Our contracts with commercial software vendors also often make it impossible to make changes.

There have clearly been some problems with plans. Since Bill Francis’s note is quite vague on the matter, I’m not sure what “abuses of College computer policy, violations of state laws, and transgressions of the values of respect and responsibility that are inherit [sic] in the College’s mission and culture” have occurred. Such abuses are also not inherent in the design of Plans. Just as abusive students can post offensive and inappropriate signs across campus, send abusive anonymous email using ITS’s mail service, or even post abusive Web pages (and remove them quickly), so can they post inappropriate things in their plans. (In fact, it is not at all clear what abuses plans permitted that could not have been done just as easily by people posting Web pages using the standard Web server, since all Plans really does is make it easy for users to create Web pages.) Such abuses can certainly be resolved in other ways, such as having a group of
faculty and students develop guidelines for the use of Plans.

Grinnell should be proud that its students have developed a useful and usable community system and work to strengthen it. Plans is evidence of the success of Self-Governance, Grinnellians’ desires to help each other, and perhaps even of the Computer Science curriculum. Crushing such a success is completely inappropriate.

I hope we can address this issue soon, since Plans have already been turned off, to the dismay of many.

Regards,

Samuel A. Rebelsky

Cc: Bill Francis, Jonathan Kensler, Jonathan Wellons, John David Stone