From A Student Perspective:
Summary of the CWRUnet Task Force report

Abstract

The following summarizes a document prepared by the RHA/USG CWRUnet Task Force, outlining the current shortfalls and some suggestions for Case Western Reserve University's campus network. It is followed by the actual document, whose purpose is to present a unified viewpoint, from the students' perspective, of the current status of Case Western Reserve University's campus communications network. Currently, the campus network (CWRUnet) seems to be having difficulty meeting students' needs. Considering the reliance this University and its curriculum have on CWRUnet, frequent crashes, poor customer service, and minimal end-user input are problems that need to be corrected. If left unchecked, these problems will invalidate the network's place at Case Western Reserve University. The purpose of this committee, and more importantly this document, is therefore to act as a force of change, helping the administration provide the necessary services in a successful manner.

Why CWRUnet?

When CWRUnet was created in 1988, the engineers, managers, and technicians who designed it attempted to build the best, most revolutionary, technologically advanced network in the country. In many ways, they were very successful. However, today – now nine years later – many students and faculty are left confused and frustrated by the administration's goals for this revolutionary network. There can be no question that this University is now completely dependent upon CWRUnet. Many courses employ CWRUnet as part of the means for completing coursework. The University uses CWRUnet heavily as a recruiting tool. Furthermore, the vast resources available via the network's connection to the Internet complement this institution's mission quite well. This network must remain fully functional and visionary if the University wishes to remain competitive among other educational institutions.

What services should be provided?

In order for CWRUnet to provide the best possible service, making it the visionary network that it should be, a few important items are needed. To begin with, students and faculty now rely upon the network to such an extent that dependable, reliable access is of major importance. CWRUnet cannot realize its fullest potential as a powerful resource unless *each and every user* can fully depend upon it. Secondly, and more importantly, the network needs to contain valuable information that students and faculty can and will want to access. With the many resources from across campus available on CWRUnet, users will save time and energy locating needed information. There needs to be a concerted effort in this area to provide these resources *online*, as it were. Finally, it is important to remember that some of the users of CWRUnet are not as computer savvy as others. Though the network *is* a wonderful teaching tool in and of itself, without the proper technical support and documentation it becomes exceedingly frustrating and complex. The University needs to ensure that effective, relevant technical support and help is readily available to all of its users.

How can CWRUnet provide these services?

The CWRUnet staff has done a fairly good job implementing their original goals, but unfortunately it may be time to rethink the purposes behind them. As previously stated, the University needs to be fully committed toward making the network as reliable and dependable as possible. To achieve this, it may be necessary to implement a progressive plan of action – this plan might include such goals as installing backup equipment, providing 24 hour monitoring of the network, and more rigorous testing of new components *before* they are installed. (These are just examples, a more detailed analysis is covered in the RHA/USG document.) The actual content of the network is very important as well. To provide this, strong student and faculty input is needed, detailing what they believe to be meaningful online resources. All possible options must be thoroughly researched before any action is taken. The biggest mistake that could be made, and that this committee specifically does not want to imply or support, would be a quick solution to these issues. The final issue, that of adequate technical support, may require a few changes. Current documentation is needed *each* school year, detailing specific parts of the network, and covering the major types of computers that are used at the University. This should be available in a printed form, so there are no frustrating paradoxes (students cannot access online help if they cannot use their network). More service technicians may be needed, or a better system devised, to help deal with the large number of problems a large network inevitably accrues.

There are a few, final items to note. This committee's goal is not to attach blame to any of the aforementioned problems. In fact, it is our belief that the staff that supports CWRUnet (Information Services) has one of the most difficult jobs on campus. However, the problems detailed here are very real to students and faculty alike. Timely, deliberate response is important, to maintain both Case Western Reserve University's reputation, and to ensure the students' well-being. As response to individual problems *is* important, response producing more long-term solutions would be better. Therefore, the strongest recommendation that this committee can make is that a permanent rapport be developed between students and Information Services, so students do not feel as though their problems with CWRUnet are unimportant.