

Registration

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something UNL would get. A new student information system, including admissions, recruiting and financial aid data and conveniences such as touch-tone registration, was included in a \$970,000 package the NU Board of Regents tabled at its December meeting.

But James Griesen, UNL vice chancellor for student affairs, said other plans, such as increasing faculty salaries, got higher priority from the regents than the SIS proposal. And after Gov. Ben Nelson announced his frugal budget plans for NU, Griesen said he didn't expect a new student information system soon.

Still, he said, changes will have to be made eventually, because the student records system is "obsolete, non-integrated . . . and brittle."

"If anyone touches it, the whole system could collapse," Griesen said.

Parts of the current system, including the registration program, have been used since the '60s. Griesen said it doesn't meet administrators' needs anymore.

UNL programs created since the late '70s, such as the College of Journalism and the nursing program, aren't recognized in the databases. Double majors, "something that's really in vogue right now," according to Griesen, cannot be denoted on student files.

That means administrators have to take extra time to look up the data they need. If they mail information to all students with a certain major, for example, they might miss some who are double majors. When the university adds another college, such as the proposed College of Fine and Performing Arts, it causes further headaches for computer programmers, Griesen said.

To students, perhaps no part of the system is more cumbersome than registration, with its course request forms, worksheets, drop/add sessions and lines.

Most UNL students try to get a jump on the crowd by going through preregistration. But over the last six years, the percentage of students who received complete schedules, containing the number of hours requested, with or without alternate courses, has declined steadily.

For second semester 1986, 72.3 percent of the 17,993 students who went through preregistration received full schedules. By this spring, that percentage had dropped to 66.7 percent of 18,571 students.

Pfeifer said that between 50 and 55 percent of students get full schedules with no alternate sections or courses during preregistration.

Many students fail to get full schedules because of their own mistakes. About 15 percent mark the course request forms with incorrect call numbers, Pfeifer said.

When a freshman math major accidentally requests a graduate-level history course, the computer notes the mistake and the student's schedule is printed out incomplete. That student then must go through drop/add to fill out the schedule.

If UNL had touch-tone registration, it wouldn't have to keep such statistics. Students could correct the errors with phone calls instead of going through drop/add.

Between 120 and 150 universities nationwide have touch-tone systems, according to Jan Loomis, director of marketing for Rochester, N.Y.-based Information Associates, one of the companies that manufactures them.

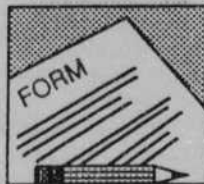
UNL lags behind, Griesen said, because of a lack of financing and a decision that "didn't come to fruition."

In the mid-'70s, the Lincoln campus was given the task of developing a universitywide information system for the three NU branches: UNL, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Because there were no proven packaged systems available at that time, officials decided to make their own, Griesen said.

They might have bitten off more than they could chew.

Registration systems at Big Eight universities



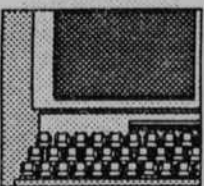
University of Nebraska-Lincoln--

Course request forms are fed into the computer. Several weeks later, students receive schedules in the mail.



University of Colorado, Iowa State University--

Students register by calling from a touch-tone telephone. When they hang up, they have confirmed schedules.



University of Missouri, University of Oklahoma, University of Kansas, Oklahoma State University, and Kansas State University--

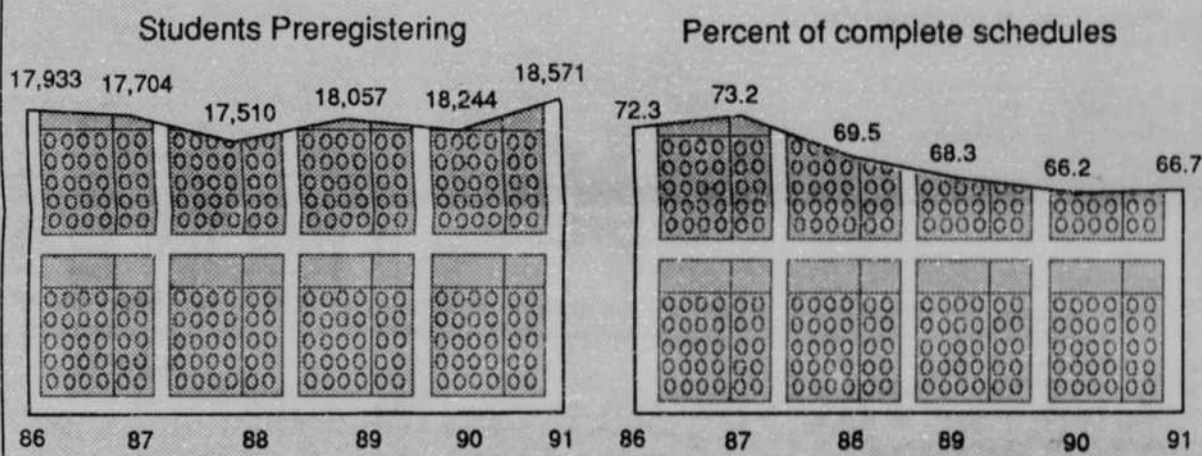
Students register during individual sessions at computer terminals. When they leave, they have confirmed schedules.

Source: Big Eight registration officials

Amie DeFrain/Daily Nebraskan

UNL Preregistration Trends

A look at students who preregistered and received complete schedules



Brian Shellito/Daily Nebraskan

When programmers started working on the new system, Griesen said, they found out it was a "gargantuan task." The program fell behind schedule in the late '70s and early '80s.

"It was eating up more and more of our computer resources," he said.

By the early '80s, UNO and UNMC officials could wait no longer for the programmers in Lincoln to create a universitywide system.

NU leaders decided that all three campuses should buy their own packages from Information Associates. UNO and UNMC bought the software. UNL did not.

"Lincoln had a half system, a commitment and no money," Griesen said.

Looking back, he said, the decision to fix a system from scratch was a mistake. Even if more time and money had been invested, the current system would be obsolete because technology has changed so much since the mid-'70s, he said.

Plans have changed, too. In January 1989, a UNL Student Information System Task Force, consisting of administrators and professors, investigated the options and costs of a system and issued recommendations in a report released in April 1990.

Last summer, the NU Information Systems Management Council, which includes representatives of the three NU campuses and Kearney State College, decided that those institutions should move toward putting student information into an IBM database using the university's mainframe computer.

The council recommended that the campuses work on separate proposals to develop their parts of

the integrated system. The \$970,000 request that the regents tabled would have gone toward UNL's portion.

UNL's timetable called for university officials to lobby the Nebraska Legislature for funding during the current session and, with approval, begin installation in August, with parts of the new system running by July 1992.

The plan would have revamped all UNL student records to place them on one database. According to the SIS task force report, it would have contained all "core" student information: registration, records, admissions, financial aid, student accounts and recruiting.

"The current amalgamation of systems and programs handles many of these operational processes, although not in a single integrated system," the report said.

Currently, UNL stores most student records on three different software packages, two of which are obsolete, Griesen said.

Each software system, called an operating environment, simplifies data storage and retrieval. But each must be entered separately, with its own codes. Data on every student are stored in all three, but when information is updated in one database, it isn't automatically changed in the others.

Donna Liss, coordinator of information management for the UNL Computing Resource Center, said sorting through the three databases on the IBM mainframe plus others on a Digital Equipment Corporation computer and on personal computers is almost impossible.

"I don't think there's anyone on this campus who could do that," she said. "You'd be better off going through folders."

Griesen said training new personnel to retrieve student information can "drive them out of their minds quickly."

But "our greatest problem is our inability to serve students the way we should," he said.

With some information systems, Liss said, students can use telephones not only for registration, but also to find out how much financial aid they will receive, to get their grades and to check their balances at the Bursar's office. Degree audit systems let students monitor their progress toward degrees. They also show at a glance what requirements students would lack if they were to change majors and virtually eliminate the need for senior checks, Liss said.

A new registration system, she said, would ensure that students had filled prerequisites for the courses they requested. She said in the past, UNL colleges have done that by hand.

Griesen said another problem with the current system is the cost of maintaining the two obsolete software packages.

UNL spends \$120,000 a year to lease the packages, Griesen said. If the university upgrades its IBM mainframe computer, the cost of leasing the packages will go up to between \$150,000 and \$200,000, he said.

The NU biennial budget request for 1991-93 calls for such an upgrade, but budget proposals by Gov. Ben Nelson and the Nebraska Legislature's Appropriations Committee eliminate the plan.

Until a new information system is installed, Griesen said, UNL will have to lease both obsolete packages.

"We are wasting money because

we have no way to escape," he said. The computers also take so long to convert between the old and new systems that it would amount to \$200,000 worth of computer time if it were billed out, Griesen said. In addition, UNL is maintaining scanners for course request forms used during registration that it would not need, he said.

Not counting the computer time, Griesen estimated UNL spends about \$200,000 a year that would be unnecessary with a new SIS. But he cautioned that UNL would not save "oodles of money" with a new student information system.

"You never save money when you upgrade systems," he said.

The \$970,000 was proposed as a one-time expenditure. UNL still would have to lay out money every year for maintenance and to work the bugs out of the system. And in the 1 1/2 years Griesen estimated it would take to get a new SIS running, UNL would have to pay for both systems.

Other than the extra money for software, the current registration system requires mostly paper.

Tony Schkade, assistant director of registration and records, said schedules of classes cost 17 cents each, course request forms cost 3 cents a piece and worksheets, a nickel each, totalling about a quarter per student.

One of the costs of a touch-tone system is for additional phone lines. UNL would need between 32 and 64, Schkade said.

At first, touch-tone registration at Iowa State caused some problems with the telephone system. So many calls came in that lines in the entire city of Ames were tied up.

Now Iowa State has specific phone lines for registration. And the university assigns each student a time to begin calling. But some students still have a hard time getting through to the computer.

"You have to call about eight million times," Eslinger said, before the busy signal stops.

Even after they get through for the first time, many students call back again and again.

In fall 1987, before the move to touch tone, Iowa State's computer logged about 198,000 computer actions — adds, drops and schedule changes — during the entire enrollment process. Under the new system, students made 238,000 such actions — about 10 per student — to register for the fall 1990 semester.

"But it (registration) is lots easier," said Kathy Jones, Iowa State associate registrar. "There's no paper trail."

In the fall of 1987, under the old system, 2,582 students went through drop/add at Iowa State. This fall, with touch-tone registration, that number dropped to 1,556; another 369 used the phone for drops.

Jones said the decrease shows that students are more satisfied with the classes they get and that they can handle scheduling problems before classes begin.

At Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, where the first touch-tone system in the country was installed in 1984, student response was overwhelmingly positive.

Wayne Childs, BYU registrar, said that in a survey, 99 percent of BYU's 27,000 students said touch-tone registration was easy to understand. About 83 percent said they had had no problems registering. Almost 70 percent gave the system a "very positive" evaluation, while 28 percent rated it "moderately positive."

Drops and adds decreased by 40 percent after the touch-tone system was installed, Childs said.

"Professors were jumping up and down and saying 'hurrah,'" Childs said. "The first week of school is now like the third week."

Those advantages UNL once again will do without. Instead of punching telephone buttons like Eslinger at Iowa State, 18,000 students will try to beat the rush by turning in preregistration packets beginning Monday.

About half of them will get the courses they want, when they want. Another couple thousand will get alternate courses or sections. Others will try their luck at drop/add or general registration.