

ORION Visible in IT Winter Skies

At the recent Tier One "technology camp," University of Louisville employees got an update on Project ORION—and how it is poised to play a bigger role than ever in university-wide operations.

ORION, or Operational Records and Information Online Network, is an evolving project designed to standardize student administration and personnel information across the university utilizing the PeopleSoft software system. Tom Sawyer, an assistant vice president for Information Technology, is very excited about U of L's progress so far. "I just got back from a university conference," he reports, "and there are a lot of other universities that are considering what we started seven or eight months ago."

Several factors make the ORION initiative more critical than ever. As systems age and fewer people familiar with how to run obsolete equipment are available, hard-to-solve maintenance problems crop up. Separate systems across the university allow for inconsistent mainframe information sharing among departments. In 1999, the question of Year 2000 compliance is a major issue; no already-existing system at U of L is Y2K compliant. ORION technicians within IT are working hard to ensure that the new system is effectively and efficiently running when the clock changes next January. Advanced PeopleSoft conversion is scheduled to continue into 2001.

The impact of the new system will be felt from paycheck-earning employees to misplaced students. "Students will no longer need to go to seven different offices when they change apartments," cites the English department's Dale Billingsley, who has worked extensively with IT's Information Systems department. Until then, he says, "mail follows them around for years and years until it finally ends up in the dead letter office!" He also uses himself as an example of how a streamlined recordkeeping system could solve a routine problem, explaining how he inadvertently was listed under two Social Security numbers within the university and had extreme difficulty straightening out the otherwise simple transcription error.

"The benefits of a unitary system," he says, "are data integrity [consistency], a distributed workload"—a different way of describing actions by one system rather than involving a series of discrete parts—"and World Wide Web applications" that students and staff will be able to access from anywhere there is Internet access.

Course scheduling and admissions applications have already received the Project ORION treatment. Human Resources will be one of the upcoming beneficiaries of the ORION project.

This year, payroll, benefits administration, applicant tracking and time and labor reporting will be combined under one umbrella. In Student Administration, access to everything from course catalogues online to student billing is pending—with eventual access at the touch of a button.

"What Project ORION is aimed at is to make sure the information is as good as it can be. Good knowledge leads to good decisions," says Dr. Billingsley. "Not only will straight information, such as transcripts, be available, but analytical tools such as online benefits review for employees and transfer evaluation forms for students considering a change in major.

Back in IT, Marla Thomas, the director of Information Systems, projects that "ultimately, there will be thousands of workstations across campus that will have access.

That shows the importance of a centralized mainframe." It is the responsibility of newly trained Tier One personnel across campus to "make sure their stations are configured correctly, working properly, resolving any questions ... to the best of their ability." ORION training is already underway in some units, with general training beginning in 1999.

"ORION is our biggest step into this arena," says Mr. Sawyer. "It will be our most critical step over the next 18 months to two years." He ponders the hard work required to retain all the information on a continual basis, but deems it worthwhile, given the nearly 90 schools implementing PeopleSoft systems. "We know it's the right direction to take. There are universities that would kill to be where we are."