

Financial Aid Award Process Goes Online

Courtney Henry wasn't in her pajamas when she accepted her financial aid package for the fall semester, but she could have been. Thanks to a new online self-help service, students can access, and interact with, their financial aid information anytime from anywhere.

"As soon as I got the letter announcing the new service, I went online," says the senior from Columbus. "I was amazed at how quickly I finished. It was easy, really even more than user friendly."

"It was both simple and fast," concurs Anginita Butler, a sophomore from Clarksdale. "Personally, I found the old way a hassle, where you had to go to Martindale and wait in line just to accept your aid package. I really love that they've provided this new service."

Student comments like these are music to the ears of Laura Diven-Brown and Veena Mantena.

"If students find it easy to use," says Diven-Brown, Director of Financial Aid, "then we've done our job."

"More than 4500 students have already accepted their fall awards," notes Mantena, a Systems Analyst III and the Information Technology Web Team lead, "and there have been over 60,000 visits to the site as they check and re-check their information. Seeing those numbers gives me a really good feeling, because you know it's working and the students are using it."

Diven-Brown and Mantena spearheaded the collaborative effort between Financial Aid, Information Technology, and Sigma, the software vendor for the Financial Aid system.

"We looked at pre-packaged modules out there, but one big advantage to developing the system ourselves was that we could customize it to our specific needs," Diven-Brown explains. "It was a lot of work because we had to define all the requirements and then Veena had to make those happen. She worked under a very tight schedule and did a great job. Not only does it function well, but it looks really nice."

"One complexity was making it real time," Mantena says. "That feature wasn't available with any of the other modules, since they only performed updates on a daily basis. In our system, when students accept, decline, or reduce their awards, that information is stored and re-run right away, twice actually, so they can see those changes immediately."

In just two years, Financial Aid has moved from a paper-

based system to one that is almost fully automated.

"We've gone through four or five conversions," comments Diven-Brown. "It has been an incredible evolution for us. To find that we're getting to the point now where we can see the benefits and offer enhanced services is really great for our office, because it hasn't always been easy."

With 75 to 80 percent of Ole Miss students on some form of financial aid, the award letter process used to involve thousands of pieces of paper which had to be entered manually into the system. With the new automated system, the staff at Financial Aid can now fine tune their services and focus on those students who need individualized assistance.



Veena Mantena and Laura Diven-Brown (l-r) look over the new award letter interface.

"I really think our office is about customer service," states Diven-Brown, "but to do that well and serve such volumes of students requires having automation in place. That's key to our success, and to me this has been a very smooth launch of something so massive."

Diven-Brown reports that other schools are inquiring about the new system, and Mantena and she have spoken at conferences about it, with the real time aspect being of particular interest. This is a nice way to finish a project that involved some very long hours for them both.

"It's all worth it now," Mantena says, smiling. "I really enjoyed doing this."

Diven-Brown laughs, "We both loved the project. It was the deadlines that made it stressful!"

Now That's a Good Deal

The University of Mississippi has enrolled in the Microsoft Student Select program, which allows students to receive substantial discounts on certain Microsoft products. For example, a student can obtain Office 2003 Professional for \$63.30, a major savings when compared to standard pricing. Students can access this service by visiting <http://elms09.e-academy.com/olemiss/> and using their webID and password to sign in.

Contreras Finds Technology a Plus in Any Language

Elizabeth Contreras, a Spanish instructor in the Department of Modern Languages, remembers the first time she really started using technology.

“It was when I arrived at Kent State University to get a master’s in Translation,” she recalls. “I did my undergraduate work in English Linguistics at the University of Chile in my native Santiago. There we had Word and systems for translation, but when I came here, there was e-mail and the Internet, and that was when a whole window opened for me, because there was access to everything.”

Contreras had a semester of comprehensive training as a teaching assistant at Kent State.

“One thing we learned was how to use technology in our lessons,” she notes, “and most of the time it was PowerPoint, but that was something new as far as teaching a language goes. The traditional method had been to use a text book in the classroom, with emphasis on memorizing long lists of vocabulary, and then the students would go to the language lab on their own. Everything was very disconnected.”

Upon completing her master’s, Contreras went to work for a barcode software company as a translator. When her husband, Andrew, was accepted as a Ph.D. student in the TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Languages) program at Ole Miss in 1999, they moved to Oxford.

“When you come to a new place, you never know how things are going to turn out,” she observes. “At first I continued to work as a freelance translator, but then I had the opportunity to teach Spanish at the University as a substitute. Everyone seemed to like what I did, and I was asked to start working as a full-time instructor in January 2000.”

Contreras at first found a very traditional methodology being used in Modern Languages, but that soon changed as the depart-

ment underwent a major transition that summer.

“A new text book and methodology were introduced, and all the instructors had to take a class,” she explains. “That was very strange for some people, but it was more than just the methodology, there were also online components and new technology to learn.”

In the four years since, Contreras has used Mallard (the online program introduced that summer), Blackboard, and e-mail as integral parts of her teaching.

“With time, we’ve achieved great things here at the university,” she asserts. “Between the LRC (Language Resource Center) and Weir Hall, it’s amazing what is available for faculty and students to use. I find it more interesting to be teaching now because the technology makes it more interactive.”

Contreras notes other advantages in using technology to teach.

“Students can work at their own pace,” she explains, “which is important because not everyone is at the same level. Additionally, the online deadlines are set up so students are prepared when the class meets and that allows us to concentrate more fully on actually speaking the language.”

But she warns there are distinct challenges when computers become critical to the coursework.

“First of all, you have to make sure everything works right!” she exclaims. “We have training sessions in the LRC at the beginning of the semester so students learn how to use the equipment and programs. But still you must be able to give them technical support, so sometimes you’re not just teaching the language but the technology as well.”

“It’s also important to let the students know up front just what your rules are regarding technology,” she adds.

“They can’t e-mail you and expect you to drop everything to respond right away, and they can’t wait until the last minute to do an assignment and then expect an extension because they had a technical problem!”

Modern Languages is in the process of switching from Mallard to a new system called OneKey CourseCompass, which has Blackboard integrated. Contreras says this transition has been easier for the faculty than the last one, and that will be helpful in teaching the students.

“We’ve seen that the instructor’s attitude towards technology makes a difference,” she states. “If you have a good attitude, you can transfer that so easily to your students. That’s why it’s very important for a program to work with their faculty in terms of making them feel comfortable with technology. And you have to have a good system!”



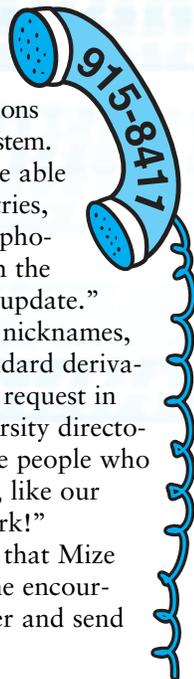
Using Blackboard just got easier,
thanks to two new features created by IT staff members this summer.

First, instructors and students won't need separate accounts for Blackboard (and yet another password to remember!) but rather will use their webID and password to login to the system.

Second, Blackboard and Campus Management will be synchronized with regard to enrollment. Instructors will have a new link from the "Class Rolls and Grades" website in which they can "Blackboard Enable" a section. This means that as students add and drop in Campus Management, those changes will be reflected automatically in Blackboard.

Both services will become available in late July. Watch your e-mail for further announcements or contact the FTDC for more details.

"Thank You for Calling the University of Mississippi..."



So begins the pleasant female voice of the new automated directory assistance system installed recently by the Telecommunications Center. The system, which can be reached anytime by dialing **915-8411** (or just 8411 on campus), is intended primarily for use after hours and on holidays and weekends.

"We're not replacing the live operators that are available Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.," explains Operations Manager Michele Mize. "They can still be reached by dialing 0 on campus or 915-7211 from off campus. The automated system is a backup, providing directory assistance on a 24-hour basis, which we felt was needed in case of emergencies."

Callers are prompted to say the name of the department or person they seek. For departments, the system first lists the number, then transfers the call. For individuals, it simply transfers the call without listing the number. Faculty and staff should note that only their office numbers are connected to the system.

Phonetic Systems, Inc. provided the automated service, which has four phone lines available and can handle up to 17,000 direc-

tory entries. Still, unusual names and pronunciations sometimes prove to be a challenge in using the system.

"There are some names the system won't be able to find," says Mize. "But for most unusual entries, we simply e-mail Phonetics with the name and phonetic pronunciation and they record it and push the file back down to our system for an automatic update."

Mize goes on to note, "A lot of people use nicknames, so the system is smart enough to check for standard derivatives, like Beth for Elizabeth, if it can't find the request in the formal listings taken from the official university directory. We've even been able to customize for those people who go by nicknames unrelated to their given name, like our own [Telecommunications Director] Buster Clark!"

The system has an option for listing events that Mize hopes departments will soon be able to use. She encourages everyone on campus to try the new number and send any feedback about it to dirasst@olemiss.edu.

There's a New Supercomputer in Town...

And Other Research Computing News

From Jason Hale

In the Mississippi Center for Supercomputing Research (MCSR)

We've got a new computer in the MCSR, and it's one big, bad machine...the most powerful supercomputer we've ever had, in fact.

It is an SGI Altix 3700 high performance computer server named "redwood," and it features 64 Itanium2 processors, 64 Gigabytes of centralized memory, and 2.336 terabytes of fiber channel disk. The Altix platform is new, exciting technology which has won awards for its innovative architecture.

The support team has been busy installing software, and the system will soon be available to researchers on campus and around the state. It should be especially valuable to those in physical chemistry and molecular modeling who tend to be our most demanding users, as far as resources go.

"The Altix will have a tremendous impact on my research, which involves the study of important chemical problems through theory and computation rather than experiment," explains Dr. Gregory Tschumper in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. "In fact, using software packages optimized specifically for the Altix, we'll be able to study chemical phenomena that were previously inaccessible with MCSR's other systems."

Got numbers to crunch, stats to analyze, results to model? Information Technology administers 50 seats of a 100-seat license to use SPSS for Windows on the Ole Miss

campus (the other 50 are split between the Schools of Applied Sciences and Education).

If you're interested, we can install SPSS on your PC for a one-time charge of \$350 (the usual academic pricing is \$1597 for the components covered by our license: SPSS Base, SPSS Advanced Models, and SPSS Regression Models). For those who already have SPSS 9.0, we can do an upgrade to the latest version, 12.0, for \$100.

Dr. David Rock in the School of Education has had good results with SPSS.

"It's a powerful package used by our faculty and graduate students to analyze behavioral statistics," he says. "It provides quick and efficient results which allow the user to spend quality time analyzing the data rather than crunching the numbers by hand."

Ten of the newest, fastest PCs in Weir Hall have been equipped with SPSS 12.0 and will provide plenty of access for students with SPSS assignments. Anyone interested in SPSS should contact assist@mcsr.olemiss.edu.

IT also has renewed its 75-seat network site license for XWin32, an X Windows terminal emulator for Windows platforms. Current users can download the newest version from www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/computing/xwin32.html. To obtain the new license string, e-mail assist@mcsr.olemiss.edu.

For more information about MCSR systems and services, please visit our web page at www.mcsr.olemiss.edu.

Over 2500 incoming students attended nine different orientation sessions during the month of June. On the first afternoon of each two-day session, orientation leaders assisted attendees in using their webIDs and registering for fall classes. Shown here in action at the Galtney Center are leaders Olivia Lusco and Erica Smith (l-r) and Orientation Director Whitman Smith in the background.



Enhance Yourself!

The Faculty Technology Development Center will host the annual **Technology Enhancement Week** from Monday, September 13, through Friday, September 17, 2004. Workshop topics include the following:

- Adobe Acrobat
- Introduction to Blackboard
- Capturing and Editing Digital Video using iMovie
- Creating DVDs
- E-mail to Groups
- Faculty Test Scoring
- Imaging and Scanning Basics
- Introduction to High Performance Computing and the MCSR
- Macromedia Dreamweaver
- Mail Call: Tips and Tricks for Making the Most of E-mail
- Managing E-mail Mailing Lists
- Overview of Academic Technology @ UM
- PowerPoint for Beginners
- PowerPoint for Advanced Users
- Statistics Starter
- Using Excel to Manage a Gradebook
- Using Multimedia Classrooms on the UM Campus
- Using the Blackboard Gradebook
- Virus-Free Computing

These sessions will be open to all faculty, staff, and graduate students on a first-come-first-served basis. For more information, including times and locations, visit www.olemiss.edu/depts/ftdc/training/falltraining2004.html.

Putting Spam in the Can

The Office of Information Technology is in the process of installing new software called PureMessage, which is an integrated spam and virus protection application. It will run on five new servers in the Data Center, managing over a million messages per day.

"This is a very flexible program and should reduce spam by more than 90%," says Robin Miller, Director of Technical Services. "One challenge we have is that spam is not just incoming, it is also generated on infected computers on campus and then sent to other entities, causing companies such as AOL to deny us access to their facilities until we can stop inadvertently spamming them. Therefore, this new product will be configured to trap both incoming and outgoing spam."

For those who miss getting spam, all such messages will be placed in "quarantine" so users can retrieve the spam that was destined for them. The target date for going live with the new system is August 23, 2004.



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