



**Report from CIO's Consultation on
Student e-Communications Services
February 19, 2010**

Consultation Terms of Reference

1. To review the range and adequacy of current University services that support the e-communication needs of students.
2. To recommend to the Chief Information Officer (CIO) future directions for student e-communications services that reflect changing academic and co-curricular needs, enhanced student experience, and fiscal priorities.
3. To identify concerns and obligations in matters such as the protection of privacy and information security that must be addressed in determining provisioning arrangements.
4. To recommend to the CIO the way in which student e-communications services should be provided; that is, which should be University-operated, which University-facilitated, and which left to personal arrangement by individual students?

Committee Membership

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Arif Anwar, Student, OISE
Christine Arsenault, Director, Department of Management Co-Op Program, UTSC
Robert Cook, Chief Information Officer
Michelle Cortes, Strategic Communications
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Chris McGrath, Assistant Dean, Student Affairs, UTM
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Maryann Raby, Student, UTSC
Seamus Ross, Dean, Faculty of Information (iSchool)
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Kim Stymest, Student, Faculty of Information (iSchool)
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Assessors:

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Meeting schedule

The committee met four times in person and at times with audio/video participation of some members at UTSC and UTM: November 30th, 2009; January 13th, 18th, 25th, 2010. Between meetings, a variety of communications platforms were used to conduct the committee's work, including the Portal, print, and email.

Broadening the consultation

The committee solicited and received input from students, faculty and staff via a number of channels. Full information about the consultation was featured on the I+TS website that provided a webform for anonymous submission. RSS feeds, campus digital displays, Facebook, and a Varsity ad directed interested parties to the website and survey form. Student Life staff distributed notices to student organizations on all three campuses, and all students at UTM were emailed information.

The greatest participation was from staff working with students. The proportionately smaller number of student submissions led some committee members to suggest that students take email for granted and assume its availability as a part of the fabric of University communications services. The web survey remains open and active.

Topics discussed

- Current student e-communications services
- Security issues in student e-communications
- Types of data students communicate via University services
- Expectations around the security of the University's student e-communications services, including FIPPA, PHIPA and PIPEDA compliance
- State of our current e-mail services
- Alternative options for the future
- Desired features in student email services (e.g., functionality, availability, capacity, rich media handling, multi-channel access, integration with other University services, integration with third party services, ...)
- Future directions for student e-communications
- Other e-communications channels – Portal, etc
- Targeting the academic purposes of e-communications

Materials reviewed

- “Collective Wisdom on E-Mail Outsourcing”, Judith A. Pirani, ECAR Research Bulletin, Volume 2009, Issue 23, November 17, 2009
- “Appropriate Use of Information and Communication Technology” University of Toronto (2004)
- “Policy on Official Correspondence with Students”, University of Toronto, Governing Council (2006)
- “Outsourcing Student E-Mail & Other Collaboration Services”, Wendy Woodward, Northwestern University, 2007
- “When E-Mail Is Outsourced” Inside Higher Education, November 27, 2007
- “Outsourcing Email and Data Storage: Implications and opportunities” Briefing Paper, Richard Otlet, et al, JISC, December 2008
- “Arizona State University Success Story”, Google Apps for Education Case Study, 2006
- E-Mail Options Matrix, as produced by Integrated Client Services for the consultation group (2010)
- Information Grid for Student e-Communications, as produced by Integrated Client Services for the consultation group (2010)

Observations and Insights from the Consultation

- Email has become a commodity service, no longer part of the “core” activities that differentiate the University from other institutions.
- Given its academic mission and fiscal priorities, the University will never keep pace with the e-communications service levels provided by specialized commercial providers. Catch-up would be costly now; worse, it is a never-ending problem.
- The U of T identity is valued, and actively desired, in a student-accessible email domain name, e.g. @utoronto.ca (Sub-domains would be acceptable, e.g. @student.utoronto.ca)
- Students want communications to be available through multiple channels (e.g. web, voice, instant messaging, email, ...)
- Students want anywhere/anytime access to information. Solutions must be mobile-friendly and compatible.
- Integration of information (e.g. through the Portal) is desired, but email, serving multiple purposes for students, should also be accessible from interfaces outside the Portal.
- Systems used by the University should acknowledge and facilitate the ability and right of individual students to manage and personalize their communications interface. One size (interface) does not fit all.
- Redundancy of messaging across channels is necessary to support that individualization goal.
- Solutions should be standards-based to maximize flexibility of access under individual user control.
- “Pushing” important messages (e.g., emergency notifications, schedule changes, course critical dates, etc) is welcomed. Solutions should make it possible to target specific messages to cohorts of students who share attributes (e.g. college, campus, year, course, etc.)

- Enhanced student e-communications should incorporate the following functionality: improved availability, improved capacity, an “available capacity” indicator, folder management, calendaring, handling of rich media formats, group workspace, chat, global address book, file exchange and storage, improved search, integrated messaging.
- Solutions must be user-friendly -- intuitive, easy to learn and simple enough for the average student to use.
- Students expect and trust the University to appropriately protect their information. They do fear misuse of information (e.g. data mining) and the communications channel (e.g. advertising) by a third-party provider.
- It is recognized that the University can negotiate terms of service with third-party providers, and can walk away from proposed solutions if conditions cannot be met.
- The University must maintain appropriate information privacy protection when working with non-University partners.
- The University is uniquely positioned to educate students (as well as faculty and staff) in best practices in e-communications, especially security. This may be a more productive target of its energies than simply providing commodity services. “E-literacy” instruction covering tools, security, and online searching was proposed.
- It is appropriate to distinguish between level of system security and users’ perception or knowledge of those levels of systems security. Users’ knowledge is the most important. The University has an obligation to communicate and train its communities about information security levels supported by its solutions. Differing levels of security are acceptable for different types of data (public, personal, financial, research.)
- There is diversity of IT access, knowledge and requirements across our student populations (e.g. prospective students, international, co-op, continuing education, students at affiliated institutions; students with disabilities; alumni; students who handle research data, personal health info, etc.)
- Concern was expressed about the vulnerability of communications on University email systems to foreign laws (e.g., the US Patriot Act.) The view was expressed that security arrangements between the US and Canada may already make data on University systems available to foreign agencies. It was agreed that institutional negotiations with external providers would clarify and likely enhance security of data over that provided by the personal arrangements being made by individuals with these same providers.
- A uniform solution across campuses and divisions to meet general student email requirements is desirable. The specialized requirements of some populations may legitimately lead to localized solutions. However the large number of existing local email solutions is likely inefficient and unnecessary. Their number would likely be reduced by availability of an improved central offering.
- The University has an opportunity and responsibility to lead in the effective uses of technology. Our standard e-communications solutions should complement that knowledge creation role.
- E-communications solutions should anticipate growing demand and the inevitable emergence of newer technology. They should be as flexible as possible.
- No matter what e-communications solutions are adopted, realistic exit strategies must be identified and actively maintained.
- Some students expressed an interest in University-mediated telecom service deals for students.
- There is a need to broaden the conversation about e-communications services across the whole University, not just with students.

With respect to current services and potential alternatives:

- The current UTORmail service has inadequate capacity, so continuing it or rebuilding it at current capacities is an inadequate solution. Our technical staff assessors report that UTORmail is near end of life.
- As it is desirable to maintain an @utoronto.ca identity, it is inadequate to simply collect students' existing third-party emails.
- Issuing a U of T email address that simply forwards to a students' third-party provider aggravates the risk of non-delivery of important messages and is therefore undesirable (although there was some argument that this solution most realistically reflects the diversity of student needs and supports individual student control of e-communications.)
- The opinion was expressed that most students would not be willing to pay for additional institutional email capacity, but they do want it.
- Enhanced services run in-house by the University would likely offer the greatest flexibility and potential for features and integration with existing systems, but with escalating cost.
- Outsourcing email would most likely be cheaper, likely with less, but perhaps still adequate, functionality than an in-house solution. Security and privacy are the most commonly raised concerns about outsourcing. While discussion made it clear that we would do well to ask tougher security and privacy questions of all our systems and practices, it was agreed that any serious consideration of outsourcing would have to thoroughly investigate and clarify relative risk related to security and privacy.
- Outsourcing email may have implications for the Policy on Official Correspondence with Students and the Guideline for the Appropriate Use of Information and Communication Technology. Early practice by Alumni Affairs created an expectation of "email-for-life" for some UTORmail users who are no longer actively associated with the University. This expectation can be met by migrating such users to the new externally-hosted alumni.utoronto.ca email service.
- The opinion was expressed that most students are more interested in the services available to them than in how the University provides them.

Regarding the relationship between the Portal and student email services:

- The Portal and email services should be complementary solutions in a consolidated e-communications strategy.
- While email should be accessible through the Portal interface, it should be architected to also be accessible, when desired, without entering the Portal
- It is necessary to recognize the limitations of certain communications channels for accomplishing some tasks. Should email be expected to handle course assignment submission when better channels (Portal) are available? Assigning tasks to the proper channel will liberate the email specification from not having to accommodate something that it's not set up to do.
- There is a complementary need for easy-to-access advanced communications tools (e.g., social networking) to build community among students in support of civil society ... but this should not necessarily be within the email system.

Next Steps

The CIO will develop a response and provide recommendations to the Provost with regard to future development of the University's student e-communications services.