Research Computing Advisory Committee (RCAC)

Minutes April 25, 2011 (taken by Erik Deumens)

Present: Mike Conlon, Erik Deumens, Rob Ferl, Lauren McIntyre, Sanjay Ranka, Susan Sinnott

The Strategic Plan for IT (SP) was approved April 15 by the advisory Council and will now be presented to the different stakeholders and the President Machen for approval. Then it will be made public.

All advisory committees have been given the charge to develop a detailed implementation plan to accomplish the objectives of the SP.

Ranka inquires as to the time scope of the implementation plan and whether there should be two, one for the first 18 months and one for 5 years. The plan should be written as an integrated plan with the 5 year vision providing the frame work for the work of the first 18 months.

Several issues are discussed:

1. If a researcher has a problem running some software, such as SAS or SPSS, how do we provide adequate support without bankrupting the effort? We leverage expertise that exists in the university. We provide a central place for people to find each other on web pages, in a Wiki, a forum, on Facebook. We build that infrastructure and have our staff direct people to these resources. We may even consider retaining expert scientists, such as faculty and senior postdocs, in the departments as part-time consultants to the HPC Center and the Research Computing initiative to be available to answer queries. We should also find topics to organize workshops on. Vendors, such as SAS, Wolfram will come and give seminars and workshop on the use of their software.
2. This mechanism not only works for software but also for advanced instrument use.
3. Instead of supporting complex software environments on every user's desktop, we can provide a pool of virtual desktops that are ready to go and quick to start. Remote access over modern networks and the compute power of processors to do compression/decompression makes this possible. CTSi and CTRIP are doing this now. It also works very well for trainees who do not have an assigned desktop and are here too short to install a custom desktop for them.
4. We need a central place of experts to field and route calls. We need a tracking system to make sure problems and their solutions are available for others to consult. The typical student-manned help desk is not adequate for supporting research computing. TeraGrid have their advanced support personnel and software engineers man the phones on a

5. We need a new class of people in this support role. Not just IT staff but scientists who know what the users are doing and know experts who can help with a given problem.
6. The long term problem of data management needs special attention. We need to create a subcommittee to be a task force dedicated to this problem. It includes data curation policies and tools, hardware, software, advice. We need an enterprise wide architecture. Can we devise a measure of the savings generated by providing a central service?
7. Another long term challenge is to organize knowledge about research at the institution so that it can be searched and is useful. VIVO does that.