To: Members of the Faculty Senate

From: Eric Roberts, Professor of Computer Science

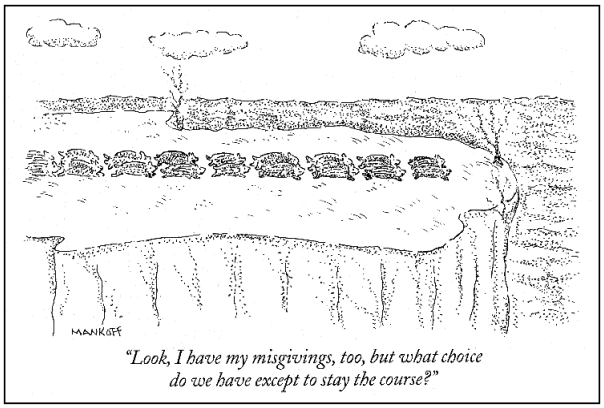
Subject: The case for further review of administrative data processing at Stanford

Date: May 27, 2004

> *My friend, either you are closing your eyes to a situation you do not wish to acknowledge, or you are not aware of the caliber of disaster. . .*
>
> — Professor Harold Hill in Meredith Willson's *The Music Man,* 1957

In the discussion following the presentation by Susan Calandra and Chris Handley at the May 13 Senate meeting, I outlined several of my ongoing concerns about the Oracle-based enterprise software systems currently in use at Stanford. As I noted at that meeting, I did not have time in the open session to offer any detailed background and therefore promised to prepare a more comprehensive analysis of the issues at a later date. While much of that material will, as reported in the minutes, have to wait until the fall, I believe it is important and timely to address the question as to why we need to keep this issue on the table, given that the university has committed itself to the Oracle suite of administrative systems.

At the last Senate meeting, several faculty members expressed, in one form or another, the view that the decision to adopt the administrative systems we are now struggling with was made in the past and that there is therefore no point in second-guessing the wisdom of that decision, given the time and resources the university has invested in implementing its choice. For the most part, I agree with this position. My interest in raising these concerns is not to argue that we should have chosen a different course in the 1990s but rather to determine how we should proceed from where we find ourselves today.



"Look, I have my misgivings, too, but what choice do we have except to stay the course?"

The New Yorker, May 18, 2004

In my view, there are three reasons why we, as the elected representatives of the faculty, need to keep this issue on the table:

1. *We cannot afford to ignore the frustration and unhappiness that so many of our administrative staff members feel in many parts of the university.* In Chris Handley's February 19 presentation, the leading item in his list of concerns was that "staff morale is very low." That assessment remains true today, despite modest improvements in the functionality and performance of the tools over the last few months. Morale is particularly low in units such as the School of Engineering, in which the large volume of grants and contracts brings with it extensive reporting requirements necessary to maintain compliance. Several of the administrators with whom I've spoken in the last few weeks—people whom I have found over many years to be extremely competent and efficacious—report that they are no longer able to do their jobs effectively. It does no good, as Dean Stipek suggests, for faculty members who never use these systems simply "to model a positive, upbeat response" to those who suffer with them every day. In doing so, we would only succeed in transferring to the faculty the antagonism that administrators now direct toward ITSS. The university depends on a mutually supportive relationship between staff and faculty. Driving a wedge between those constituencies is in the interest of neither side.

2. *In evaluating how Stanford should proceed from its current position, it is imperative for us to base our decisions on the realities of the situation as it exists and not as we would like it to be*. As I expressed earlier in this memo, the central question is not what Stanford might have done in the past, but where we go from here. There is a great deal of water under the bridge, and the fact that any subsequent change in direction would entail significant costs must be factored into any decision the university seeks to make. That being said, I am not convinced that "staying the course" is the best strategy for the university even at this point in time. Our current strategy also has high costs, and it is impossible to determine what data-processing strategy makes sense for Stanford in the long term without taking a comprehensive, open-minded, and honest assessment of the situation today and the various options for moving into the future.
3. *We must understand the failures of judgment that led to our current position so that we can avoid such errors in the future*. One of the most important reasons to engage in retrospective analysis of past decisions is to learn from one's mistakes. Stanford, for example, learned some useful lessons from the experience of installing the PeopleSoft student information system two years ago. Had those of us who were concerned about that process not raised objections at that point, the transition to the Oracle system would have been even more painful than it was. Greater attention was paid to functional requirements, senior administrators were given a greater voice in the transition process, and the rollout date was delayed to ensure that everyone had more time to adapt. Similarly, it is important to understand the problems associated with the current transition to smooth the path for the next. Software systems are never finished, and there will inevitably be transitions down the road. If they are as painful as the transitions have been in recent years, we will have missed an important learning opportunity.

I therefore propose that we revisit the issue of Stanford's administrative data processing in the fall with a view toward developing a sustainable data-management policy that will serve Stanford over the long term. That review must begin with a thorough, independent investigation of where we stand at that time—an investigation based on the real experience of users with the system as it exists and not on optimistic notions of how it might be. The body that undertakes that review should also be tasked with considering a wide range of possible options, not limited to incremental improvements in the systems at hand.