

NO NEED FOR CAL TO LAY OFF HUNDREDS OF STAFF

Savings can be found in improved technology performance on campus

The University plans to lay off some 200 workers in order to realize a salary savings of \$20 million, and the cuts are set to begin soon. But the people being fired are almost all essential to the main functions of the University – teaching, research, and public service. They include the key people in department offices and student services. Previous layoffs have cut our staff to the bone. Staff can barely cover their own jobs, and many of them are covering those of fired colleagues. It is not unusual to receive phone messages and emails from staff at night and on weekends – and that is not a flex-time arrangement.

Whereas the quality of Berkeley's faculty and students is universally measured by external evaluators as second to none, the same has never been demonstrated of its administrators, whose ranks have swollen by 175% in the past decade. These executives have led us deeper into a mire of outmoded, self-referential, and isolated technological systems on campus, and they have cost us hundreds of millions of dollars.

Before laying off a single worker, UCB administrators should immediately adopt a plan to replace all the technological systems on campus with ones that work and that talk to each other. Currently, BFS (the accounts system) is isolated from RES (the purchasing system), and SPO (the research grants and contracts office) has no idea what is going on in either of these systems, or at the level of the departments and units where purchasing is done. Some employees have to download information from one system, retype it into another, and upload it to move it to the next step. Some have to create a pdf of data and physically fax it to another place on campus.

The online RES forms, recently “rolled out” to great fanfare, do not work: you cannot electronically enter data in some of the requested boxes. So you have to print out these forms, write in the information, and give it to a staff member to forward down the line where it will eventually be uploaded. Recently, VC John Ellis dismissed the entire group of people who had just finished the *ninth* iteration of the BFS, because it was still unworkable.

And think about what students put up with. TeleBears and bSpace are hopelessly primitive, and the DB2 (the student database that staff use) is so awful that students who took their Subject A (AWPE) exam in May are still waiting for their scores, so they can't enroll in advanced classes. Every other UC campus informed its students by early June. By the way, if you're a faculty member and have not yet dealt with APBears, you will at your next personnel action. Be very afraid, because this system will take you weeks to understand, it is full of bugs, and the administration's response to identified problems is glacially slow.

Now imagine what could be: when you log on to the University website, it recognizes your computer and asks for your password. Faculty can see at a glance their course schedule and class rosters, and they can email all students as needed, attaching assignments and resources. They can check their financial accounts instantly; a purchase ordered yesterday is tracked through the system and when completed is immediately debited against the appropriate fund. Students can see at a glance their registration status, course schedule, campus events, upcoming deadlines, new assignments and resources, and campus billing, each in a separate window. They can see a real-time roster of all the courses for next semester, with times of all labs, discussion sections, and evening exams. They can list all the courses they want to take next semester and submit them all at once, and know instantly their enrollment status.

Sound idealistic? Not at all. Amazon.com does it already, and so do hundreds of other retailers. Amazon.com greets you when you return, shows you cool new things you might like, directs you to what you need, gives you options and choices, keeps a record of what interests you, handles your billing, tracks your interactions, informs you of progress, and asks if there's anything else they can do. We can do that here. It would take time, vision, and foresight; and, yes, people would eventually have to change some of their habits. Some people would also change their jobs: those now re-entering data and spending half their time trying to get around electronic systems that don't work could be redeployed for useful functions, including those in their job descriptions. They could return to helping students and faculty.

Hold the phone! This would cost big money. Yes, it would. The campus needs to raise it or borrow it -- enough to float this project and to save the jobs of the 200 folks who are going to be fired because our administration is completely lacking in vision. Yes, it will take time. This system, like the east span of the Bay Bridge, has to be developed in parallel as the existing one limps along. It must be built carefully, with input from all manner of front-line staff around campus. Then, after thorough ground-testing and debugging with the help of users, the conversion can take place: programs, data, information, records, everything. Of course, Amazon.com wasn't built in a day. But do you notice how its system gets better and better? You can't say that about our University's systems, can you?

But how will this save money? You save money by investing in time and quality. If it takes three weeks to learn voice recognition software, you still save hundreds of hours yearly because you can speak faster than you can type. You also save your wrists from carpal-tunnel syndrome. By keeping the staff who matter, and not forcing them to use time-wasting, outmoded systems, the University will not lose hundreds of years of experience from staff who will not be able to pass on their hard-won knowledge. One of the greatest tragedies to scholarship in human history was the burning of the library at Alexandria. Yet the planned layoffs will do the same thing to the accumulated library of our staff's wisdom.

The Information Technology committee of Operational Excellence and top IT officials on campus know that the current state of affairs is untenable and are hoping to rebuild the campus IT system from the bottom up. But it cannot be done piecemeal and it must be a top priority of the Chancellor if it is to be done right. And first it will take admission by the University's top administrators that they are taking the wrong road by firing necessary people while wasting the equivalent of their salaries each year on Stone Age technology.

The University needs to raise the money to fix this long-range problem, and it needs to do so now. The University borrows money all the time – for buildings, for sports programs, and for new administrative incentives (where did the money to hire Bain & Co. come from?). Our IT systems cannot last and cannot be updated. They are mastodons and they will soon be unworkable. The University has to admit this. It has to adopt a comprehensive plan to integrate all campus systems and build them to work together. And it cannot go back to the same old people, supervised by the same old administrators, to make this happen. They have already failed us for decades.

Call Amazon. Call Google. Call J.Crew, J.Jill, J.Press, or J.Peterman, or even the undergrad who runs an international custom T-shirt company. Get people from outside who know what they're doing. Fire the executives who have shown repeatedly that they don't, and their staffs with them. **We need a radical solution, and we need it now.**

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