CNS /Update Newsletter Feature

Interim Provost Dr. David Colburn Maps Campus Computing Future

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UF Information Technology

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## Table of Contents

Interim Provost Dr. David Colburn Maps Campus Computing Future  ........................................3
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Recently, /Update staffers sat down with Dr. Colburn to talk about his new roles as Interim University of Florida Provost and chair of NERDC's Policy Board, his views on UF's future, and the part NERDC will play.

Q: What is your educational and professional background?

A: I received my Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1971. Now, I'm a professor of history and executive director of the Reubin O'D. Askew Institute on Politics and Society at the University of Florida.

Q: Do you consider yourself a computer person?

A: I am mostly a word processor. I use a computer all the time in writing. Occasionally I'll create tables and charts. Mostly I'm processing words. Q: What do you see as NERDC's role at UF?

A: I think NERDC's role is crucial to the process of communication that takes place on this campus. We use NERDC at a fundamental level now. It used to be an exotic thing. But it really has become like our "right hand" in the communication process. Now we use NERDC for basic research, for classroom communication and enhancing the classroom environment. So it comes into play in ways which I don't think any of us anticipated 20 years ago.

Looking toward the future, I think part of NERDC's role is to help us in structuring a plan for this. NERDC will be helping define ways in which to improve education and communication, both within the university and from the university to the state. This will include video teleconferencing and traditional telephone communication in addition to the World Wide Web and other computer data networking it is providing now.
Q: What projects are you working on that involve university computing?

A: University computing is very important. What we want to do is find ways in which to enhance computing on this campus. We've got to improve the access that each of our faculty members has to computing and to communication with the outside world. We've got to enhance computing resources for the students. With the many different folks who are involved in computing here, we need to make sure they're talking to one another and providing the services that students and faculty need. We're looking at the possibility of centralizing the networking process in some way. NERDC would be a fundamental part of that conversation.

Q: What do you see as UF's next step in distance education?

A: I think just doing a lot more of it (distance education). Not just within Florida, but beyond the state of Florida. Florida reaches out in significant ways in its global trade to the Caribbean and Central and South America. I can see us getting involved in distance education extending outside the bounds of Florida into the Caribbean. And if (Cuban Dictator Fidel) Castro should fall from power, I can see Cuban Floridians, those who've settled in Florida, wanting UF to provide distance learning opportunities to Cuba. Right now we don't do enough distance education, although we're constantly expanding. We probably don't do enough within the state with distance education. I think the market and opportunities are enormous. Factoring in the cost and the expense of delivering the program, relative to the revenue—that's an important part of any consideration. That's probably slowed down the process a bit. But again, we learn more every day as we work on distance education.

If we go north, I think the competition is pretty significant. You've got UCLA, which has already spread across the country. Additionally, universities from the northeast have moved into this region. Moreover, southern universities have been expanding in this direction. I think there may be some areas in which UF has particular strengths that we could deliver to the southern US region. But my guess is our strongest markets could be the nations to the south. I also believe wireless communication will play a major role in education on campus and in delivering education to other areas of the world.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style?

A: My own approach is to talk to a lot of people and to utilize the strengths of the campus—the faculty and staff—to reach decisions on directions we might take with computing or with education in general. Basically I talk to people and get their advice. I think that's fundamentally what's involved—that's my approach. It takes a little longer to get things done. I need the advice of people who are more sophisticated than I am. I think conversation is a good thing on a university campus.

Q: What perspective will you bring to the position of NERDC Policy Board chair?

A: I would like to see computing work more effectively for faculty and students on this campus and to make sure we move forward and integrate some of the newest developments in computing and networking. I think wireless and videoconferencing are two of the things that are developing rapidly. The costs on videoconferencing are coming down and down. The ability of faculty to do videoconferencing with students, particularly at remote sites, as we do in distance education, is a valuable thing. And also on campus, sometimes what we find are more and more students, who, instead of coming by for your office hours, are e-mailing you. If we can talk to them rather than typing words back and forth to one another, that would be a real asset. We probably
can't do videoconferencing out of every office right now, but maybe we can do it centrally out of the department in some way that might be useful for faculty to go there and have an opportunity to video-conference with students and with colleagues at various sites around the world. I would need to talk to a lot of people about this to know which direction to take.

Q: **What are you looking forward to most about your new position?**

A: What's exciting about being provost is you have an opportunity to improve the academic environment, to help UF prosper and continue to progress forward, and to become one of the best universities in the nation. Also, the chance to increase the value of a degree from the University of Florida for the students, and to make the educational environment a positive and exciting one for faculty. Those are things that this office has an opportunity to do. And that's what I think really makes it stimulating and exciting.

Q: **Anything you'd like to add?**

A: On a basic level, one of the things we're trying to do is to upgrade, in a less-sophisticated way, the classroom environment generally: the classroom conditions the faculty and students encounter. Our physical plant is utilized to such a considerable degree that the wear and tear on it is enormous. And so we're trying to develop a systematic plan to improve the quality of the classrooms for instruction purposes. And connected to that is computing and various forms of communication with students. The role of NERDC is, I think, fundamental to this process. It's a little more exotic than just the basic teaching that takes place in the classroom, but it greatly facilitates what we do. And so we're trying to make conditions much better for faculty and students-both the classroom environment and the communication process.

To support this process, we're trying to add additional funds for wiring on campus. The expansion of our bandwidth is especially important so we can do many other forms of communicating. And I think that's going to happen. But we need to bring all of this together. We can't bring in a videoconferencing line, a teleconferencing line, and a telecommunications line. We've got to bring them all in together. We need a big picture approach. We need a big picture plan for how we're going to do this effectively. So NERDC will be a critical part of this process.

/Update would like to thank Dr. Colburn for taking the time to talk us.

**Your Comments are Welcome**

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send your comments to:

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