

Memo

To: Susan Hippensteele, Chair, Manoa Faculty SEC
From: David Ross, (Former Chair, Manoa Faculty SEC)
Subject: Google Mail
Date: 4/17/2011

As you know, I was UHMFS Chair (and co-Chair of the ACCFSC) when the subject of the UH intent to move UH Webmail to Google Mail became known to us. As this is on this year's UHMFS agenda, I thought I'd recall the history of this proposal, and communicate and update some concerns that were communicated to me (and by me) last year.

Of course, as I am no longer a voting member of the Senate (let alone its Chair) these comments cannot in any way be construed as officially representing the Senate, nor do they represent my department. They don't even necessarily represent my personal views: as VP Lassner likes to point out, my department has its own server, so I mainly do not use Mail@UH at all. They are just process considerations we've discussed as well as general concerns about the proposal that I've heard from other faculty.

1. Overview

In April 2010, VP for IT David Lassner came to the All-Campus Council of Faculty Senate Chairs (ACCFSC) with a plan to outsource UH Webmail to Google's Gmail. This was to be done in two parallel moves, one for student email and one for faculty and staff. We were told that student email could be moved without moving the faculty email, though administratively it would be most efficient to do both. (While a fair number of universities have outsourced student email, only a tiny fraction has done the same with faculty email.)

The immediate reaction of faculty on the ACCFSC was mixed: some disliked the current mail system and looked forward to a change; others had concerns about Google's policies or more generally about the growing consolidation of information. My own primary concern, as co-Chair of the Council and chair of the Manoa Faculty Senate at the time, was process. ITS seemed to be treating this as simply a technical issue, but it was clearly also a matter of academic policy, and faculty deserved a chance to consider how this would affect their professional activities and to have a meaningful voice in the final decision.

2. Process: Meaningful Consultation

At the very least, we wanted a clear case to be made for the benefits of the move, backed with some evidence. We formally called on VP Lassner to empanel a working group including faculty to look at the pros and cons, for the group to have open meetings, and to wait until Senates can weigh in on the move based on the findings of the group. (See attached letter.)

While Lassner did come to the Manoa Senate, no working group was created, and the level of "consultation" has consisted of (i) a few brief informational visits of VP Lassner to the Senate and ACCFSC, (ii) incorporation into an advocacy document of unsubstantiated responses to some questions raised at these meetings, and (iii) a categorical unwillingness to commit to respect of any decision of the Manoa Faculty Senate concerning their email.

The lack of meaningful consultation is of extra concern because we've never been given a full report on the decision to make this move, only what might be called an "advocacy document" in which the proponents advocate for the move with no discussion of alternatives and no budgetary details supporting cost estimates.

Presumably VP Lassner's office did due diligence before making this decision, including:

- Careful, detailed projections of the costs and benefits;
- Feature-and-price comparisons with competing "free" educational offerings (such as those from Hotmail, Yahoo, and Zimbra);

- Cost of outsourcing of email to paid services (who would become our clients); and
- Independent (not Google-supplied) case studies of those if any of our peer institutions which have outsourced email.

At the very least the Faculty should be able to see a detailed report on such research, just as we do with other kinds of institutional reorganizations.

3. Costs and Benefits

Some important issues remain not satisfactorily addressed:

A. There is no obvious service benefit.

Some faculty at UH are supporting the move because of the added features of Gmail, but it should be noted that faculty who want to use Gmail can already do so. Therefore, moving faculty hawaii.edu mail to Gmail will simply decrease email options for faculty.

We have not yet had a thorough discussion of whether the extra features are really benefits to us professionally. For example, one feature that is frequently brought up is Gmail's superior indexing technology. Recent events in Wisconsin and Michigan raise questions about whether the ability to quickly and easily search the server and online archives is always such an obvious benefit.

Likewise, unintentional consequences of the subsumption of the UH email brand to the Gmail brand are easy to imagine. For example, some of our faculty conduct business in foreign countries without democratic governments. If a government decides to interfere with Gmail (as China did last month) a faculty member who does work with colleagues in that country could find her ability to communicate with them impeded.

B. The case for substantial financial benefit has not been made

It is so unusual for System to express genuine concern over administrative cost that we are inclined to weigh cost savings arguments very heavily. However, the case for such savings has not yet been very convincing.

When VP Lassner came to the ACCFSC last year, we asked about the financial savings to the University, and he said that the savings would amount to approximately one staff member's salary. This isn't very much on the scale of the whole System budget, moreover nobody really expects to see the ITS department actually shrink as a result of the move. The current advocacy documents for the move have added some projected equipment savings, but they are minor and the bases for those estimates are not given. In addition:

a) A survey of adopters of Google Apps for Education indicates that only 65% have seen any savings at all from the move.
(https://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=jB9qDAI2l2OmamZHPTvmh7B4k72FmLxCbRDtl_2f4C_2fjI_3d)

b) Much of the asserted savings involves an estimate of \$200,000/year in costs for the servers. Since these servers are presumably multi-function, since email access will presumably still pass through UH machines, and since compliance with 2006 FRCP ruling will likely mean copies of email must be mirrored locally (<http://www.eweek.com/c/a/Data-Storage/Businesses-Generally-Ignoring-EDiscovery-Rules/>), this savings projection is certainly optimistic.

c) Even if this savings of \$200,000/year is realistic, it only amounts to around \$30/faculty member across the System. For what has become such a vital component of both the research and teaching mission of university faculty, this is small per-capita price.

d) When ACCFSC raised questions about Google's business model - in particular, why they are so anxious to provide free email to us - VP Lassner replied that Google wanted to expose students to Google products with the idea that they would be consumers of Google's commercial products later in life. Even if this argument applies to students, it makes no sense for faculty. More plausible is that Google will try to sell UH their commercial email management product Postini. This software is site-licensed to Google Apps clients for as much as \$85/user/year, which would more than eradicate any savings from the move.

C. Concern over the Googlization of Higher Education

Universities are often said to be in the education business, but really we are in the business of creating, preserving, and transmitting information. It has long been part of our professional mission to nourish as rich an information ecosystem as we can. With Google Books, Google Scholar, and now Google Apps, Google has been greatly increasing their presence in Higher Education, and any increase on the centralization of control over information (and possible reduction in the diversity of information sources) is a legitimate cause for academic concern. Google's mission is not the same as ours, and this difference is apparent in their terms of service, where (for example) they reserve the right to terminate a user's service for "commercially reasonable" reasons (Section 11.2 of http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/terms/education_terms.html)

In a book published last February, Siva Vaidhyanathan (Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia) raised some cautionary questions about what Google's growing information monopoly might mean for what he calls "the future of knowledge" (http://www.insidehighereducation.com/news/2011/02/16/new_book_explains_how_google_has_taken_over_knowledge_and_learning). Even if we disagree with the conclusions of this book, as with the consolidation of the news

industry there are obvious dangers to the erosion of choice in any aspect of information technology, and in the absence of strong benefits we should not be cavalier in any decision to give up even the one small bit of choice represented by the UH email system.

4. Other Faculty Concerns

Most of the concerns heard from faculty opponents to Gmail relate to privacy, security, and ownership of information and intellectual property. These issues have been widely discussed in academic circles (eg <http://chronicle.com/article/Despite-Risks-IT-Officials/48503/>), and form the basis of intentional decisions at such peers as UW-Madison and UC-Davis to not move their faculty to Gmail (http://vpriet.ucdavis.edu/outsourcing_email_04.2010.pdf). In particular, there have been concerns about privacy of student records, data mining, and so on. It should be emphasized that these are much more issues for faculty than for students, since our professional communications are governed by the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act, NIH guidelines on medical information, and so on. Although Google has given assurances on some of these issues, and ITS has expressed their confidence in the policies, Google's track record on privacy in particular is not very good, and ITS confidence with respect to data protection is not as reassuring as it used to be.

5. Conclusion

UH-Manoa faculty were instrumental in creating the infrastructure that became the Internet, and our ability to share in the expert and honest evaluation the pros and cons of outsourcing email in general, and moving to Gmail in particular, should not be underestimated. It is puzzling that ITS chose not to take advantage of this expertise by ignoring our request for establishment of a joint working group.

In the absence of complete information with which we might carefully evaluate the proposal, it seems premature for the Senate to make any kind of recommendation at this time.

Appendix: Email from ACCFSC to VP David Lassner, 4/19/2010

David Lassner
Vice President for Information Technology &
Chief Information Officer
University of Hawaii

Dear David,

Email has become a critical tool for both the research and teaching mission of university faculty, especially at UH where we are so geographically isolated. The All-Campus Council of Faculty Senate Chairs (ACCFSC) is concerned that the proposal to privatize UH email might have ramifications for faculty in some areas which might not be apparent to IT specialists, administrators, or even other faculty. We are also concerned that the process of consultation did not take place earlier in the genesis of the proposal, so that issues of concern to the faculty could have been identified and addressed when more options were still being considered.

We therefore ask that the VP for Information empanel a working group to consider such concerns; that this group should at the very least include faculty experts on communication and security; and that they have one or more open forums in which interested faculty can meet and discuss their concerns. We also ask that they not implement any such proposal until the individual campus Faculty Senates have signed off on the change. We understand that there are faculty (as well as other members of the UH community) for whom the current UH email system is increasingly unsatisfactory, and therefore as Senate leaders we are pledged to expedite our careful consideration of any proposals, once genuine consultation incorporating the above elements is carried out.

Sincerely,
David Ross
on behalf of the ACCFSC