

Information Technology and Strategic Communication Committee (IT & Strat Comm)

Year End Summary 2021-22

Committee members: Tyler Sasser, Bo Zhang, Matthew Dolliver, Matthew Lockwood, Tracy Hinton, Patrick Kung, Nathan Loewen

Co-chairs: Patrick Kung, Nathan Loewen

The IT & Strat Comm Committee focused on the following tasks during the year:

1. Coordinated with OIT on various technology rollouts, issues, and enhancements.
2. Coordinated with Strategic Communications personnel on rollouts and messaging. The committee worked to bridge a gap between Strat Comm and the UA faculty.
3. The committee worked with OIT to address UA faculty's concerns about campus wide IT day-to-day support and UA HPC needs so that UA remains competitive in IT-supported research activities.

1. OIT Coordination

The committee met with UA OIT team three times to discuss all current and planned UA IT initiatives. Topics included administrative/policy, classroom technology, research computing, customer service, software, email/website, and individual requests that reached the committee.

Administrative/policy:

- OIT 3-year Strategic Plan – The committee communicated OIT's process as broadly as possible. The committee looks forward to viewing the new 3-year plan.
- IT Staff retention concerns – The committee raised concerns about hiring and retention of IT personnel amid a national IT-job environment of competitive hiring. OIT has been working closely and has a good understanding with HR on this and the need to be flexible.

Classroom technology:

- Classroom upgrades – Older audio/visual equipment in classrooms are upgraded during the summer every year.
- SaaS migration for Blackboard Saas – OIT updated the committee on moving UA instance of Blackboard to a cloud-based environment. As part of the process, older content 2014-18 will be removed (OIT will still have access).
- AWS outages – The committee discussed concerns with the platforms provided by OIT that are hosted by Amazon Web Services (e.g. Blackboard at the end of Fall semester). The committee inquired how OIT might help prepare faculty with contingency plans (e.g. downloading grade books).
- Blackboard Ultra – OIT briefed the committee on the pilot project for Blackboard Ultra in Summer 2022, with the eventual possibility of a migration of the campus Blackboard LMS to the Ultra version.

Research computing:

- Physical move to DC Blox – OIT updated the committee on progress of moving the UA HPC and storage infrastructure to DC Blox in Birmingham.
- Research computing – OIT hired a second PhD level research computing support staff to better support faculty. OIT also updated the committee on on-going efforts to collaborate with other SEC universities on sharing HPC capacity, including increasing off-premises connectivity.

Customer service:

- Outreach – The committee was introduced to Melissa Green, Assistant Director for Education and Outreach, and welcomed her role to coordinate timely and useful support to faculty from the Center for Instructional Technology.
- IT Service Desk – OIT informed the committee that IT Service Desk is fully staffed for the first time. A new chat bot has been created to handle many frequently asked topics.
- Support issue ticketing system – OIT briefed the committee on the move to an integrated support issue system called JIRA. All IT-related support (ITSD, CIT, AVS) is under same ticketing system. OIT discussed providing a portal through which faculty and staff may see the progress of their support tickets.

Software:

- Google to O365 – OIT regularly updated the committee on the shift from Google to Office 365 (email, cloud file storage, productivity applications). The committee communicated this to the FS while also advising OIT to communicate as broadly as possible as well.
- Zoom and UA's single sign-on (SSO) authentication – The committee liaised with OIT concerning the shift of Zoom licensing and support from the UA System Office to individual campuses and issues related to integration of UA's Zoom license with UA's SSO and dual-authentication platforms. The committee communicated to FS the importance of using the SSO instead of faculty's older sign-on, in order to maintain the corporate-level (i.e. not free) features such as duration...
- Software purchasing – OIT is working with Procurement to ensure that the various circumstances affecting software purchasing are clearly communicated to faculty, department chairs, and college purchasing supervisors. These constituents are often not aware of policy changes, resulting in frictions or inefficiencies.
 - The procurement/purchasing process may change without notice due to State or UA policy and/or UA platforms (e.g. shift to PCard use; e.g. sub-\$5k purchases no longer needing UA-level approval; e.g. UA legal needing to review end-user agreements).
 - Related policies may be found by navigating to the *bottom* of the OIT software page ([Software – oit.ua.edu | The University of Alabama](#)), where the following statement may be found:
 - "Please check with your academic or administrative department to determine if there is additional software available to you. Any software not listed in the Software Catalog or not available to you otherwise must be purchased in accordance with [UA](#)

[Purchasing Guidelines](#). Software providers often times require a licensing agreement to use the associated software. All agreements should be submitted to Contract Management for appropriate review and authorized signature per [Contract Guidelines and Contract Submittal](#). If you are pursuing a new software as a service implementation, please submit a [Project Request Form](#) early in the process to seek project management and implementation assistance.”

- GIS licensing – The committee pressed OIT to further consider options for central management of the GIS software and platforms.

Email/website:

- New myBama – OIT discussed the new myBama site with the committee. OIT’s successful development of the site’s functionality and ability for ongoing updates/revisions was discussed on several occasions. New look rolled out in Sp22.
- Duo has a new look – Updates are being rolled out with a fresh, clean design and a new arrangement of the approve/deny buttons. Functionality will remain the same.
- Junk mail and phishing – The committee liaised with OIT on several occasions to discuss measures and means by which faculty and staff may enhance the ability of UA’s systems to filter junk and phishing emails. An important faculty action item is to check their junk email folders regularly:
 - Faculty should notice if an email is tagged as external, signaling it is not coming from a UA user.
 - UA Directory is now behind CAS/DUO for this reason. O365 is also effectively blocking junk/phishing.
 - College-level websites are outside OIT control, but they do communicate best practices to them.
 - Absolutely eliminating phishing would make UA’s website very user UN-friendly.
- Retiree email sub-domain name – The committee asked OIT to consider options for an alternative sub-domain name to “retiree.ua.edu”.

Individual matters:

- Repurposing faculty computers – The committee asked OIT to consider ways to redirect campus computers away from UA Surplus and towards needs and opportunities for research applications and teaching projects.
- UA travel policy – The committee worked with the FS Financial Affairs committee co-chairs on travel policy issues of faculty concerns about policies related to p-cards, purchasing procedures, and reconciliation.
- Building access and ACTcards – The committee inquired about OIT’s involvement in handling building/room access. OIT is working with Health & Safety and the Registrar to pilot an integrated building/room access with one College. If the pilot is successful, this might be rolled out across campus.

- The committee fielded a number of short-time specific IT matters to facilitate faculty's teaching and research (e.g. specific software licensing).

2. Strategic Communications Coordination

The committee met with Strategic Communications leadership twice to discuss current and planned communications policies and initiatives, as well as the StratCom's role in the Rising Tide Capital Campaign.

The committee welcomed the announcement of Ryan Bradley as Vice President for Strategic Communications.

The committee welcomed the clear and timely communications with Monica Watts, Associate Vice President for Strategic Communications.

Severe weather announcements – On behalf of faculty and staff with school-aged children, the committee asked StratCom to consider and coordinate the timing of severe weather campus closures relative to the closure of K-12 schools.

New web policy – The committee discussed the development and rollout of the new Web policy ([Web Policy \(compliancebridge.com\)](http://compliancebridge.com)). The committee expressed support for the replacement of the previous policy, but also considered the policy in terms of its development, consultation with UA faculty, compliance window, and mechanisms for faculty feedback and administrative oversight.

Staff retention concerns – The committee raised concerns about hiring and retention of web-related personnel amid a national job environment of increased wages for these types of positions.

Publicity approval times – The committee asked Strategic Communications to consider measures to increase the timeliness of publicity approvals for faculty and department announcements.

2021-2022 Goals

1. Continue to coordinate with OIT on administrative/policy, classroom technology, research computing, customer service, software, email/website, and specific individual requests.
2. Increase engagement with Strategic Communications on their mission and policy rollouts.