

University of Washington Computer Classroom Program: Interviews with Program Clients

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INTRODUCTION

The [Student Access & Computing Group](#) (SACG) was formed in 1999 to help meet the computing needs of students at the University of Washington (UW). One of the many services provided by SACG is the administration of five [computer classrooms](#) which include two rooms in Odegaard Undergraduate Library (OUGL) and three rooms in Mary Gates Hall (MGH). These computer classrooms are designed for hands-on, computer-based instruction, experimental education, and student collaboration. Clients who use the computer classrooms were asked about their experiences with scheduling and using the facilities in an effort to gather information that will help with future programming and planning.

METHODOLOGY

In October 2001, OEA program evaluation researchers met with representatives from SACG to discuss the Computer Classrooms project and to formulate an evaluation plan. It was decided that conducting personal interviews with key people would provide the best results for an initial look at the computer classrooms as part of SACG's commitment to continually evaluate its services to faculty, staff, and students.

SACG staff developed a list of 7 administrators and 13 instructors for UW programs who would be potential candidates for interviews. All candidates were contacted either by phone or email and asked to participate in the evaluation of the computer classrooms. As a result of these requests, OEA researchers conducted personal interviews with 7 UW administrators and 5 instructors.

At the beginning of each interview session, the participants were informed of the purpose of the evaluation and of the report that would be written. Interviews generally lasted 30 minutes, with extra time for follow-up questions. Interview questions included:

- Describe your association with the UW Computer Classroom staff and program.
- What do you feel are their responsibilities and mission?
- As a (faculty member, UW staff member) what are your expectations of the program?
- How often do you schedule a Computer Classroom for use? How easy and efficient is the scheduling process for you? What suggestions do you have for SACG staff concerning ways to inform the campus community of their mission and support available for faculty and students?

- By what means do you wish to be contacted by the group? (email, phone, in person) What suggestions do you have for the SACG staff concerning ways to inform the campus community of their mission and support available for faculty and staff?
- The SACG staff is interested in improving its services to the UW community, what other needs do you have with which the group might help?
- What direction do you wish to see SACG take in the next few years with regard to the Computer Classrooms? How should the program grow and develop?
- What suggestions do you have for SACG concerning ways to inform the campus community of their mission and support available for faculty?
- What suggestions do you have for meeting the future monetary needs for replacing computers and updating software?

The interviewer took notes during the process and asked questions for clarification. Researchers comparatively analyzed interview data and formed substantive categories.

RESULTS

Comments from the clients who were interviewed fell into the following categories: The Computer Classroom Mission; Scheduling; Communication; Hardware, Software, and Physical Space; and Funding.

The Computer Classroom Mission

During the interviews, all participants could articulate what they felt was the computer classroom mission. Participants stated that the computer classrooms provide an interactive computer teaching and learning environment. Some felt the computer classrooms are integral to UW programs, classes, teaching, and learning and an educational facility that supports undergraduate education. For most, the computer classrooms offer a way to enhance learning of technology because they offer a unique computer teaching environment by allowing hands-on instruction rather than just lecturing or using a projector.

As an integral mission of the UW, faculty are encouraged to incorporate technology into their teaching and student learning. Everyone who was interviewed felt that requests for use of the computer classrooms will increase as faculty and students become more tech-savvy. Currently, they each want to "keep the computer classrooms a secret" to make sure they can schedule a facility when they needed it.

The primary use of the computer classrooms was for class work, but they are also used for a variety of other purposes, such as New Student Programs and workshops. Some participants suggested a broader definition of the computer classroom mission should be encouraged, not solely as an educational facility for undergraduate education. The computer classrooms are heavily used for New Student Orientation during Summer Quarter and for Freshman Interest Groups during Autumn Quarter. In reality, the computer classrooms are part of the students' first impression of the UW. Others were not sure if the computer classroom mission was for priority use of undergraduate classes and wondered if graduate classes had equal priority.

Scheduling

Due to the high demand on computer classroom time, especially during the peak class hours between 9:00 A.M. and 1:30 P.M., scheduling proved to be challenging for some clients. A few mentioned having to schedule the computer classrooms up to one year in advance in order to ensure their reservation, especially if they needed to reserve a room for an entire quarter. Although some preferred human contact (either via email or the phone) for their scheduling needs, the web form satisfied most clients. The web scheduling form generally worked well for basic scheduling requests. Clients' expectations for a response within two or three days were usually met. One limitation of the web form identified by some clients, especially department administrators that needed to schedule many classes per quarter, was the inability to book many room requests at one time. In addition, clients who had to go through a few iterations of requests for computer classroom time felt that the process could have been simplified if they had access to an on-line calendar that displayed computer classroom availability. Another identified limitation of the web form was that it did not solicit information from clients about their room preference.

Complicated or urgent scheduling needs were better handled with personal attention, either through email or phone contact with a SACG staff member, than with the web form. This was problematic for some clients who sought personal attention but did not know who to contact. Because the schedules of student staff members fluctuated, and clients could not easily find the name of a contact person on the SACG web site, clients sometimes had difficulty tracking down a person in the event of a problem. Clients who were able to make contact with a SACG staff member were pleased with the service they received.

Suggestions for Scheduling

- Display computer classrooms schedule and availability on the web so clients can avoid requesting times that are already reserved.
- Designate a "point person(s)" for clients to contact in case they have problems or questions.
- Encourage clients to schedule the computer classrooms after 1:30 P.M. when possible. This can ease up some congestion during the peak hours.
- Add an option to the web form that will allow clients to indicate preferences for the OUGL computer classrooms or the MGH computer classrooms.

Communication

Participants were unsure if computer classroom information was general knowledge in the UW community. They felt that the computer classrooms were not announced to the campus community as a UW service to teaching and learning. Suggestions for communication to the campus community included specific emails to departments and lists of particular faculty and staff, including information in the "OnTechNews" newsletter, and making a link to the computer classrooms information more readily accessible from the main UW web portal. Communication is an issue because computer classroom clients want to know of possible changes, such as discontinued scheduling on weekends, and would appreciate advance notice.

Interview participants suggested that SACG create a web page that shows how different clients are making use of the computer classrooms. This strategy would provide ideas and share information with current and potential clients.

Other suggestions included improving communication and collaboration between SACG and other campus units. For instance, SACG could collaborate with Computing and Communications regarding networking issues and with academic departments to work on scheduling reservations for several classes at one time.

Suggestions for Communication

- Send emails to UW community regarding schedule changes and other computer classroom news, either with a list-serve or possibly in the "OnTechNews" newsletter.
- Make a link to the computer classrooms web site more easily accessible from the main UW web portal.
- Add a section to the computer classrooms web site that highlights innovative use of the facilities.
- Collaborate with other campus units to provide services to the UW community more efficiently.

Hardware, Software, and Physical Space

Clients were generally pleased with the computers in the computer classrooms. Although one client expressed frustration with broken computers during the first few critical class meetings at the beginning of the quarter, overall clients were satisfied with the speed and technical expertise with which computers were maintained. Several clients wondered about the use of the MAC lab compared to PC labs.

Computer classroom clients also suggested a more comprehensive list of software should be available on the web, including version information. They were not sure if the current software list was up-to-date. In some instances, the software available in the Computer Classrooms was not the latest version. They also noted that they needed to give 30 days advance notice when requesting use of new or different software.

The option of having a room with computers in clusters or rows was important for some clients. One client mentioned the advantage of having the computers in clusters, rather than rows, in order to have easier access to individual students who needed assistance.

One instructor criticized the air quality in the MGH computer classrooms. A student had to drop a class due to the poor air quality. There were no serious issues identified regarding the rooms in OUGL, although one client suggested that the carpeting and the paint there could be updated.

Suggestions for Hardware, Software, and Physical Space

- Schedule a thorough maintenance of classroom computers during quarter breaks to minimize problems at the beginning of the quarter.
- Continue to offer clients a choice of room configurations.
- Ensure that the software listed on the SACG web site is comprehensive and up-to-date.

- Improve air quality in MGH computer classrooms.
- Update accommodations in the OUGL computer classrooms.

Funding

When asked about suggestions for meeting future monetary needs of the computer classroom program, some clients mentioned the Student Technology Fee as a good resource. A few clients suggested seeking resources from outside the UW. Overall, clients did not have many ideas for funding sources. However, there was a general feeling among clients that the computer classrooms should be centrally funded and that individual departments or instructors should not have to pay for facility use.

CONCLUSIONS

Virtually all of the computer classroom clients interviewed for this evaluation were satisfied with their experience in the computer classrooms. Most of the dissatisfaction was related to scheduling or communication issues. Although there are steps SACG can take to improve scheduling and communication, overall the program is meeting its goals and providing a vital service to the UW community.