

UIC programmers hack away at Year 2000 computer crisis

1997-04-02

Category: News

Media contact	Email
Pre-2000	

April 2, 1997
By Leila Belkora

It's an electronic time bomb that has gained national attention.

At the year 2000 many computer programs, whether they control personal VCRs or large financial institutions, will fail when their two-digit year counter rolls over to '00.'

UIC systems analysts are working to defuse their own 'Year 2000' crisis before last-minute demand drives the price of an expert consultant sky-high.

"If you don't meet the deadline, there's no 'work-around' to this problem," says Debbie Bales, data processing analyst with the university's Administrative Information Systems and Services.

The difficulty is not just that programs are headed inexorably to a time when they will misinterpret the current year data, but that calculations based on year differences, for example, won't go forward.

UIC's student systems are among those that would break down if managers did not act. The systems allow the university to process applications, register students, bill them for tuition or telephone charges, and maintain their academic histories.

To sort through the code and implement solutions, ASIS staff members are soliciting bids from consulting companies.

Time is of the essence.

"The price goes up 20 to 40 percent every six months. The major consulting companies are already booked," said Bales.

Much of UIC's code is written in COBOL, a language that analysts disdain as "a dinosaur" -- although knowledge of the language is worth a lot today. Fixing the code will require between two and eight months of work.

According to Bales, who monitors about 50 notes a day that fellow analysts exchange in a world-wide electronic discussion, there are several ways to attack the year 2000 problem.

Programmers can expand the field, or number of digits, representing the year, to include the century.

An alternative method that UIC plans to use is called windowing. Programmers update the code to interpret the existing two digits a particular way, based on the window or span that the digits fall into.

"If the year is between 40 and 99, we'll assume the 19th century. The exception is birthdays, because we do have people registered with early birth years," said Bales.

Doesn't this mean the program will have to be fixed again in the year 2040?

"We should be fine," said Bales, who expects the university will adopt an entirely new system in the next decade.

"I don't think I'm going to be here in 2040," said Bales with a laugh.

She added seriously, "Actually that's part of the problem.

"People who worked on the earlier system expected to retire before the Year 2000 problem came up."