4-1-1977

Registration by Computer

Gwendolyn Scotton

Recommended Citation

Scotton, Gwendolyn (1977) "Registration by Computer," *New Directions*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 7.
Available at: http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol4/iss3/7

ON THE HILL

REGISTRATION BY COMPUTER

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SOLAR

Howard University Introduces SOLAR

The No-Course Card Registration System

By Gwendolyn Scotton

Registration to a Howardite conjures up images of frustrated students, faculty and staff, all coping frantically with a mass of conflicting schedules, unpaid bills, and long lines.

Although the long lines still exist, they have been shortened noticeably with students registering for the first time in 1976 under a newly computerized system, SOLAR—Students On Line Academic Registration.

SOLAR, introduced to the university last summer, is a no-course card registration system, designed to simplify registration to an on-line, real-time system. It allows students to view course offerings, reserve course places for a specified period of time, cancel reservations—all in a matter of minutes through the use of a computer. All available classes can be known at any given time. And the one-stop concept minimizes student movement from one department to another.

The elimination of class cards reduces the possibility of errors in the registration process. Statistics needed for administrative reporting, class size adjustments, and the creation of new classes are simplified and nearly instantaneously obtained under the new system.

Phase I of SOLAR was implemented during fall 1976, with early registering students receiving registration packets via mail. Upon approval by their respective advisors, students then took course reservation forms to the advisory units for computer entry and verification. The students received certificates of registration after all fees were paid.

Phase II of the system was applicable for new entrants, old students returning and late registrants. It was identical to Phase I except that students received schedule-bills (complete with courses and charges) through the mail. After fees were paid, the certificates of registration were mailed.

The plan to design SOLAR grew out of a larger plan to simplify many of the time-

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consuming manual operations associated with university programs. Situations where a computer could be used to facilitate these operations were identified—some of which included university inventory and budget ledger operations.

"We began looking for a project which would have the greatest impact on students, and decided that the first project should be registration, especially since everybody was complaining about it. Also, there seemed to be a desire to restore the credibility of the university computer system," said Dr. Ronald Crockett, director of University Planning, and one of the early proponents of the new system.

"We were trying to make registration more convenient, and when we put the then current procedure down on paper, we began to see how horrendous it was, with the intricate system of feeding cards into the computer, and the technicality of it all," said Dr. Crockett.

The new system will cut program changes which normally average between 40,000 and 50,000 per year to approximately 5,000 or fewer per year.

"The current system is designed so that if the student is satisfied with his courses during early registration, he will not have to come back in January, during the add, drop and late registration period. We are working toward a one-stop concept so that if the student does have to come back and has to stand in line, he will stand in only one, in one place, for a short duration," Dr. Crockett said.

The old computer system, designed to print out thousands of completed course schedules from a barage of financial and academic data, is now replaced with one in which course information is displayed on a screen for immediate or real time course selection. Controllers located in each school operate a terminal relaying information to centrally located computers. The process is repeated for each student. Conflicting courses are rejected by the computer.

Though the system seems to be favored by most Howardites—administrators, faculty, and students alike—there are many problems which still must be solved.

According to Dr. William Sherrill, dean of Registration, "Many people are still unwilling to acknowledge their roles in making the automated process a success. While academic registration has been automated, financial registration has not."

He said, "of the more than 47 different offices affecting registration, delinquency in any one of them can affect more than 1,000 students. The tool is only as effective as the people are willing to get the necessary information in on time and are willing to accept the consequences if they do not."

In a recent meeting of the Advisory Registration Committee—to discuss problems and lessons learned in the trial run of SOLAR—Alfred D. Roscoe, Jr., assistant supervisor of Student Accounts, spoke of the need for stricter enforcement of financial policy on meeting deadlines.

"The administration as well as the students know that university policy is delinquent in enforcing deadlines so that students tend to take advantage of the situation," he said. Also, he noted a 49% delinquency rate last fall in fee payments, that 70% of the students had financial aid.

Roscoe emphasized that this problem could be solved to a degree if students met their deadline for filing financial aid applications. He said, of 7,000 persons participating in early registration last fall, fewer than 2,000 met the deadline for fee payments.

"In the 1960s, it was university policy to drop those students who had not paid fees by a certain deadline and the delinquency rate dropped to 22%. Now, the policy that we are operating under allows a student to complete a semester without paying all of his fees. However, the student cannot come back the next semester and cannot get transcripts after graduation until all the fees are paid. In the case of the student seeking re-admission, the old balance plus one-half of the new balance, must be paid."

Another problem, according to Roscoe, lies with persons seeking remission of tuition (employees of the university or children of employees). He said, "90% of those persons with remission of tuition tried to register last fall without paying *any* fees. Many refused to honor deadlines and also refused to stand in line. If these persons would meet their deadlines, they would not interfere with on-line registration."

These are the kinds of problems which hinder any full-scale computerized process, according to Hal Collins, director of the Information Systems Task Force. The task force was set up to automate university operations on a priority basis.

In order to make the SOLAR system more effective, Collins says, the university must first define what it wants in the financial package.

"When it was decided that the University wanted financial registration computerized, we did not have enough time to make the necessary additions to the system," Collins said.

Such a financial package, according to Collins, is currently being worked out with a deadline of August set for its completion.

Despite the bugs, the system is a welcome relief. For example, Vernice Howard, director of the Educational Advisory Center, is delighted with SOLAR. She and four other terminal operators in the center assisted and registered close to 3,000 students in the College of Liberal Arts.

"I think its great for advising. No matter what I wanted for the student, all I had to do was use the correct code and the student ID and I could get it. I did not have to call all over the university for information," she said.

She is aware of the need to revise the system for registering the vast number of students in Liberal Arts, and is aware that, if a computer breakdown occurs, all the planning will be to no avail. When the computers are in good working condition, 250 persons can be registered in two

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SOLAR REGISTR

GENERAL REGISTRATION — NOVEMBER 3-23, 1976
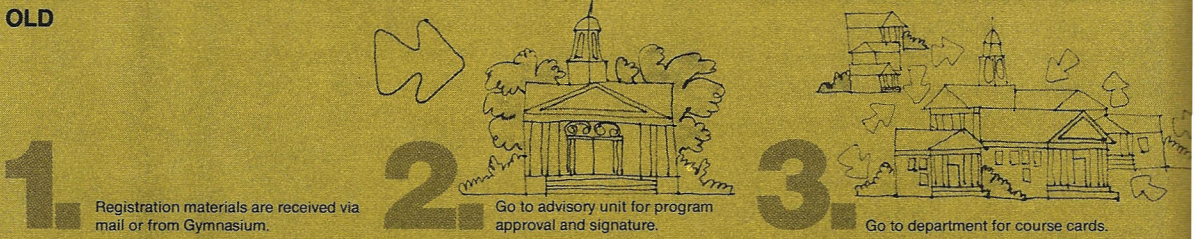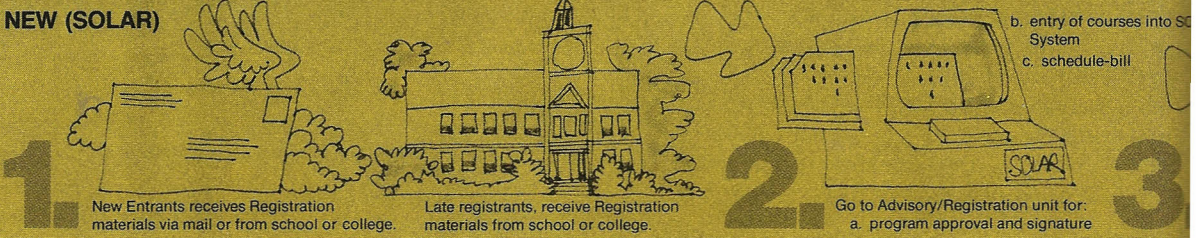
OLD

1. Registration materials are received via mail or from Office of the Registrar.

2. Go to advisory unit for program approval and signature.

3. Return materials via mail or in person to Office of the Registrar.

4.

NEW (SOLAR)

1. Registration materials are received via mail or from Office of the Registrar.

2. Go to Advisory/Registration unit for:
a. program approval and signature
b. course schedule entry into SOLAR and charges for spring '77 only

3. Schedule-Bills Student Accou

NEW ENTRANT/ LATE REGISTRATION — JANUARY 6, 7 AND 10, 1977

OLD

1. Registration materials are received via mail or from Gymnasium.

2. Go to advisory unit for program approval and signature.

3. Go to department for course cards.

NEW (SOLAR)

1. New Entrants receives Registration materials via mail or from school or college. Late registrants, receive Registration materials from school or college.

2. Go to Advisory/Registration unit for:
a. program approval and signature
b. entry of courses into SO System
c. schedule-bill

3.

TION

5.

Pay by established deadline December 15.

4.

Pay by established deadline (January 5, 1977.)

a. fee assessment
b. payment of fees

c. course card validation
d. photo I.D.

...ration materials to

...m for: a. payment of fees b. photo I.D., if necessary

hours—about two to three minutes per student.

George Martin, director of the Computer Center, agrees that a common problem, particularly last January, was computer breakdown in the gymnasium terminal where fees were being assessed. "We are regenerating the entire system to see if there are any electrical problems," he said.

Student Reaction

Students at the university welcome the new system, despite some of the problems noted above.

Renee Brooks, freshman from Philadelphia, said she had heard about the Howard registration hassle from her brother, now a sophomore. And when she arrived, she said, she experienced it herself.

"Freshmen should not have to go through with the types of frustrations that they go through during registration, especially with the problem of getting acquainted with a new and strange place."

Brooks said she saw a vast difference in registration during early registration of her second semester with the introduction of SOLAR.

Rowena Allen, a junior in the College of Pharmacy from Washington, D.C., has seen registration from two vantage points, having worked during registration almost every year that she has been a student.

"Registration has really come a long way since I first came to Howard. This year, pharmacy students had very little trouble getting their courses and paying fees," she said. Allen noted that while the College is smaller than most others at the University, still its success could be attributed to organization, specifically, registering students by class and by alphabet on designated days.

For the first time, the university has a clear set of standards for a completely computerized, highly efficient registration, through SOLAR. However, the process conflicts with the tradition of extending deadlines for those unable to pay fees by established deadlines, making the computer programming process an extremely

difficult one. But, according to some university administrators, the day has come for breaking new ground in dealing with the vastly complex operations of the University, including registration.

The on-line registration process is relatively new to the Washington area. Besides Howard, two other institutions—Federal City College and the Washington Technical Institute—have similar systems. □

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