

No quick cure for computing ailments

by Allison Annesley

Some U of A computing students have serious complaints about the quality of their programs.

Three disgruntled computing students approached the Gateway. Their complaints include poor teaching quality, unannounced quotas, computer overload, and the elimination of an honours course.

Their number one complaint is a lack of qualified instructors.

One honours computing science student explained, "I have had to help quite a few first year students because many times they're not told enough about the operating system of the computer to be able to do their programs. They are also not told where they can find the information themselves."

The student explained that there is a room in the General Services Building (357) with both consultants and a wall filled with free hand-outs.

The three students say that their department's staff "has considerable drawbacks."

Because of the poor quality of instructors they say many students are scared of the computer and turn to cheating.

Permanent Chair, Dr. Lee White says, "There is an orientation problem with teachers that we have to address."

Says Acting University VP Academic, Dr. Bercov, "The discipline of computing science hasn't existed for that many years and so the original faculty was formed by instructors with degrees in other disciplines. But to say that we are hiring people who are unqualified...I don't think that's right."

Dr. White says, "In Canada there are less than 20 PhD's in computing who graduate each year, while there are five to ten times that number of positions open. There is a lot of pressure from the administration to enlarge class sizes because of the faculty shortage. One of my objectives is to cut down class sizes here, especially in the higher level courses."

The students also complained of unannounced quotas having been introduced last year in the

lower level computing courses.

Said Acting Chair up until this month, Dr. Wayne Davis, "We restricted certain specialized courses to computing engineers and honours and specialization students. Anyone else had to fill out a course request form and go to their Dean. They were picked by grades and the low grade general students were chucked out. By getting rid of the marginal students we kept courses from being impacted."

Dr. White said the restriction demanded only a 5.5 average for admission and students who qualified were accepted after those students who required the courses for their degrees had been registered first.

Another student complaint was computer overload. Said Davis, "We do have a problem with providing students with computing facilities but I only know of one other university who comes close to doing what we're doing for students here. It would be unfair to say we're unaware of the problem and not trying to do something about it. Says Dr. White, "There is a problem with

procrastination. Terminals may lay idle during the week and if everyone waits until the last minute, then all the terminals are going to be busy."

Dr. Davis added that, "We've just been granted a deal with Digital Equipment Corporation for three new computers and donated equipment with matching grants from the Advanced Education endowment fund."

Computing 365, an honours computing course which was offered up until September, when it disappeared from the program, peeved the three students who spoke to the Gateway because they were all in honours programs. Departmental politics, they said, were responsible for its sudden disappearance. Instructor Dan Wilson had apparently expressed an interest in teaching the course last year and yet they were told the course was dropped for lack of an instructor. Wilson has since been offered a non-teaching position within the department and did not end up teaching the course.

The course is a good one for

an honours student to get into. Says Wilson, "They might have fifteen other people in their class whereas 315 (the more general alternative class) has two sections this year with enrolment near 200 per class." (Enrolment this term has since dropped to 165 in one class and 93 in another.)

The decision to cut 365 was made in order to open up a second section of 315.

"That was a calculated decision and to me that was the way to go," says Davis. Second year would be the only time they (honours students) would ever see any special treatment. Why should they have it in second year and then never again?"

But the elimination of 365 honours in favour of opening a second section of 315 did not satisfy the honours students, one of whom said, "I don't think the students are getting any more out of 365 at its present size than if they hadn't opened a second section whereas 365 would have been definitely worthwhile."

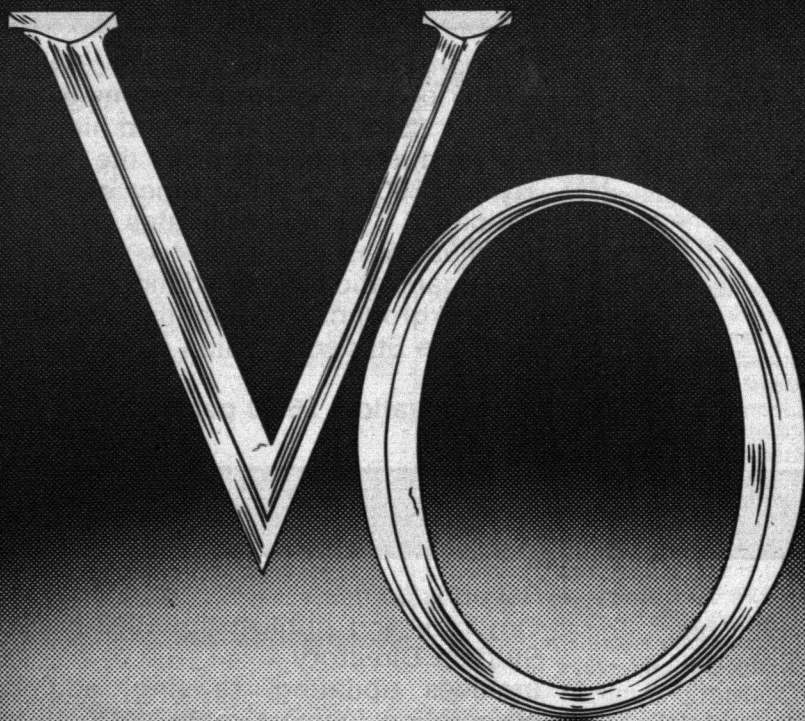
The department has had four Chairs in the last two and a half years. Both Davis, Acting Chair up until the first of this month, and White, the department's present and permanent Chair, hold PhD's in engineering. The three computing students who approached the Gateway complained that their professors should have post-graduate degrees in computing, not just in related fields. Though most of the departments instructors, including sessionals and assistant professors, do hold PhD's, Chairman White explains that a candidate with a post-graduate degree in math science or engineering who has sufficient background in computing could be suitable.

An explanation of why this situation exists is that there are very few PhD's in computing, and the few that are around are attracted to positions within the industry itself. White attributes this pattern to two things: the industry can afford to pay computing specialists much better wages than can universities, and PhD's, who naturally want to pursue research, find better facilities and more free time within the industry while teaching positions demand they be available to students.

Dr. Bercov, says the government has not yet replied to a special grant request. The University expects to learn whether they have received this funding within a few days.

"The province doesn't really appreciate the problem and compare us to NAIT," Davis says. "People from Advanced Education from the technical and vocational department don't understand us."

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