Year 2000 looms on horizon with computing nightmares

By JAN LEFEVRE

I recently read an article in USA TODAY covering Data-Processing Chief Dick Brich's one-man battle against the "Year 2000" problem existing in the city computers of North Platte, Nebraska. Although his programming warfare began in 1991, his tedious victories have been small and the city only has a mere two and a half years left to win the monumental, headache-producing, campaign.

USA TODAY reports the problem this way: The problem in a nutshell:

As the year 2000 dawns, many programs written for mainframe computers from the 1970s and 1980s and even today's personal computers may be susceptible to a glitch. If not fixed, the computers could:

- See the 99 in 1999 as an 'end of file' signal and shut down
- Read the 00 in the date 1900, not 2000
- Read the 00 as an interrupt and shut down

As I read the article, my mind raced. What about Chowan? I began to imagine a plethora of disastrous consequences that an administrative computer system failure would produce. If the system somehow abstained from an entire "shut down," what would happen individually to records such as academic achievement, accounting, development pledges and alumni data? Would I receive my January 31, 2000 payroll check?

For answers, I went to Andrea Eason, executive director of information technology.

Lefevre: Who is investigating the extent of Chowan's possible "Year 2000" disabilities and do we know the degree of campus impact at this time?

Eason: As Jim Seymour, a regular columnist for PC Magazine, stated in the March 16, 1993 issue "Mainframers are in serious denial these days about what will happen a couple of seconds after midnight on December 31, 1999, when many thousands of mainframe programs handling critical business applications discover they don't know how to deal with dates that include the year 2000." This is a tremendous problem for those programs written in COBOL that have been around for a number of years.

The effect on us will not be as dramatic although it is not something we will want to ignore or deny. We don't have legacy mainframe programs to maintain, but our existing administrative system is over a dozen years old and does not accept the year 2000.

Fortunately for Chowan, the "Year 2000" computer crisis will not be as huge a problem as it will be for many medium and large institutions. We are aware that there are potential problems with programs but we have a strategy for addressing these.

Lefevre: If the existing administrative system was left unattended, how would the problem impact Chowan's accounting, academic records, payroll etc.?

Eason: The academic records do not use the full (MMDDYY) date format. They use the semester and academic year fields and these would not be affected. We would still be able to print transcripts and grade reports without any problem. However, with the rest of the applications this is a major issue. Payroll and other checks would not be able to be printed and student bills could not be generated. Leaving the administrative system unattended is not an option that we can even think about!

Lefevre: What is Chowan's preventive plan of action for administrative softwares, college network system, and individual office, lab or classroom personal computers?

Eason: Over a year ago, we contacted CMDS (our current administrative software vendor) inquiring about a solution, and we were told that an upgrade to a newer version of the software would be required.

A committee was formed to investigate whether to remain with CMDS and upgrade our current solution or to purchase another system. Our migration strategy is to replace the existing administrative system and update the historical data. We are seeking a network-based client/server system with an SQL database that will deliver open access to the college's information.

Various systems are now under examination that all recognize and handle the year 2000. We are in the final stages of selecting an administrative solution and anticipate that it will be installed sometime within the next academic year. Histori-cal date data can be updated with the century on both the System 36 and the Admissions system before it is converted over to the new system.

Our network operating system is Novell 4.1. In the summer of 1996, Novell released patches to their operating systems to fix Netware's handling of the year 2000 and beyond. We have downloaded and applied all these patches to our servers so the network is ready. Personal computers get the current date whenever they log onto the LAN.

The college has recently purchased more than 200 new computers all running Windows 95. Microsoft and Windows 95 recognize the year 2000 without any problem. Macintosh computers never had a problem with 2000. In addition, the college has upgraded all PCs on campus to run Windows 95 so that the "old PC" situation is not a problem for us.

Lefevre: Considering the extensive state-of-the-art, campus-wide, computer upgrading taking place at Chowan, is there any way to break out an exclusive dollar figure for the "Year 2000" problem?

Eason: No special funds are required to solve the "Year 2000" problem beyond the acquisition of a new integrated administrative system. Any changes to historical data will be made in-house or as a part of the contract for data conversion.
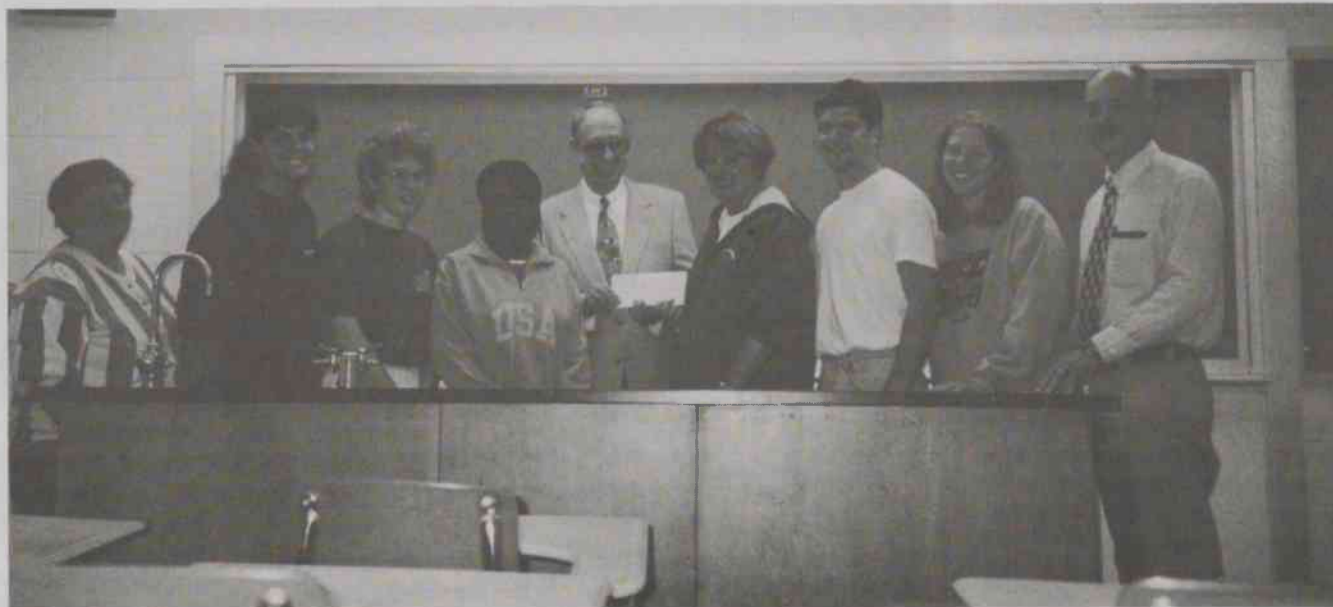
Fortunately, Chowan does not have a terrible mix of platforms with undocumented and poorly-documented applications as many institutions do, so our strategy is quite straightforward.

We will be ready when the clock ticks down to midnight December 31, 1999.

Chowan ready to face problem as clock ticks down to the turn of the century

The debate on "Academic Freedom vs. The Institution's Right to Limit Use of Its Resources" followed the addition of CyberPatrol, a software product limiting Internet access and censoring written text, to the campus computer network. Debating on the side of Academic Freedom (l-r) Stephanie Stevens '00, Chris Hoyer '00, Teresa Justice, instructor of psychology, and Mary McKemy, assistant professor of psychology. The software was later removed.

Science Club President Bonnie Jordan (fourth from right) presents Garth Faile, science department chair (center) with a check for 00. The funds were collected by recycling aluminum cans. Other members include (l-r) Lia Ferettino '97, Ke Rothery '97, Janet Stt '98, Faith Jones '98, emy Funk '97, Jamie handler '99, and advisor Gilbert Tripp.