Appropriate Use of the University's Computers and Networks: 
Potentially Offensive Materials

OITS Advisory Number 1

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Topic:
Questions regarding appropriate use of the University's computers and networks (data, video, and voice) arise frequently, particularly in the context of storage, access, and / or dissemination of potentially offensive materials.

Background to the formulation of this Advisory:
This Advisory combines and updates (slightly) two DDD memos from the Executive Director, Office of Information Technologies and Services, on the topic. The dates and subject lines of the originals are: April 3, 1992, "Use of University Computers and Networks," and Feb. 23, 1993, "Network Services and Potentially Offensive Contents."

Premises:
• Specific policies should not be promulgated in circumstances for which general standards are applicable.
• Straightforward application of familiar policy standards therefore is the basis of the University's current policy in this area.
• The standards relevant to potentially offensive materials and University information technology resources include
  • law and rules against use of state resources for private purposes
  • Florida computer crimes statute (FS 815)
  • statutes and standards prohibiting sexual harassment in the work place
  • statutes prohibiting trafficking in child pornography
  • acceptable use standards for networks (e.g. Internet Service Providers, Freenets, etc.).
• The University does not condone illegal, abusive, or wasteful use of any public resources, including computers and video, voice, and / or data networks. In that sense, information technologies are no different from any other University resource.
• The University must provide as many and as powerful a set of tools as it can for the interchange of ideas, information, and data.
• History shows clearly that thought and creativity do not flourish in an intensively policed environment.
• The motive for appropriate-use policies is not censorship but avoidance of harm to the University and its people through sensible, thoughtful avoidance of irrelevant and/or harassing use of University computers and networks.

Conclusions:
• The fundamental issues are responsible, effective use of University assets and respectful treatment of the people of the University. In this regard, computers and networks are not different from other University resources.
• Students, staff, and faculty alike are obligated to meet the standards cited above. Private preferences and behavior are not determinants of proper use when the University’s assets and/or good name are involved.
• In a very large, complex institution such as UF there will be occasional abuse, unfortunately. The University deals with such abuse by straightforward reliance on the standards cited above.
• Within the University there is a wide range of opinions about what constitutes offensive material. Even if material is personally inoffensive, such material usually should not be retained, viewed, transmitted, etc. if it is irrelevant to the broad purposes of the particular system(s) and/or networks involved.
• Shared systems (for example, open computer labs) are particularly obvious examples of resources about which every person must give careful thought to the possibility that materials would be potentially offensive to other members of the UF community.
• The use of computers, networks, or other information technologies to create and/or abet a situation of sexual harassment is no less serious than any other form of such harassment. The message, not the medium, is what counts.
• Providing of hypertext links on a University Web Site to potentially offensive materials (e.g. sexually explicit displays, Web sites which are overtly racist, etc.), even though the sources themselves are not a part of the UF information resources environment, seems likely to be a violation of one or more of the above-cited standards.
• The University cannot take responsibility for what other institutions and persons provide on the Internet. Therefore, UF neither censors nor approves what is made available by these connections. Members of the UF community are warned that there is a great deal of potentially offensive material which can be encountered accidentally in the course of exploring "news groups" or World Wide Web sites.

Other Information:
Commercial use of UF Internet access is addressed by UFRFC-9. UFRFC's ("University of Florida Requests for Comments) are policy and preferred practice documents for the University's information technologies environment. They are available from the OITS home page - http://nersp.nerdc.ufl.edu/~oits
Go to the link "Policies and Preferred Practices."