

To the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department at the University of Waterloo:

I have been quite disappointed by the quality of the Computer Engineering programme at the University of Waterloo. There are a number of factors that cause me to feel this way, but they are mostly the responsibility of the E&CE Department.

To begin, I feel lied to about the “First Year” assistance program. Even from the *Student Life 101* presentation, it was assured that the Engineering department would provide an infrastructure to make the transition easier. The “practise midterms” are not most people’s ideas of help. These extra midterms only forced us to do extra work and did not prepare us, in any useful way, for the real midterms. No real support was provided. The extra math course, was again, extra work without any meaningful teaching or effort the part of the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department or the Faculty of Engineering.

My real problem is with the Department’s attitudes toward the computing resources provided to the undergraduate students. I realise that this is also the domain of Engineering Computing, but what is present to us is an embarrassment to what has been called the best computer engineering programme. I fully understand that technology is expensive, but the problems are more of management and policy than hardware. During my 2A term, the computer software needed to download our circuit designs to FPGA test boards was not operational and it took over a month and a half to correct the problem. This problem delayed all of our assignments requiring us to compress the time in which to do them. Another example of the computing resources that the Department and Faculty should be embarrassed about are the Engage and Linux servers. The undergraduate UNIX server, TAP was functional server, but horribly out of date. After it was destroyed by intruders, the replacements were not encouraging. The Engage server was present first, but it had none of the useful software. After contacting a system administrator, I was informed that there was another server that would be presented later that would provide useful software. How I was ever to know about this server, since it was not noted in any bulletin, message of the day or web page that I could find, remains a mystery. This second server was Linux which was so poorly configured I am impressed that I got as far as I did. The configuration errors were a sign that no one had spent the time to login with an undergraduate level access, since the most basic commands fails to execute correctly. I sent an e-mail to the administrator, but it failed to be delivered due to a server configuration error. This is disgraceful and sends the message that the Department nor Faculty is concerned with my computing environment.

What I also find very unsettling, as a GNU/Linux user, is how deeply the department is nestled in the pocket of the Microsoft corporation. It was my understanding, perhaps misguided, that universities are supposed to be impartial and open. I understand that the University requires standard interchange formats for projects, but I resent having to submit my reports in Microsoft Word format. When the concern is raised that students should not have to purchase this software, students are told to use the software on the *Nexus* computer network. This prevents any argument since we do have access to the tools we need, albeit inconveniently. In my view, the practicality of the situation is not my concern. It is one of inflexibility. It is very much an attitude of “take what you are given”. I realise that supporting alternative (i.e., non-Microsoft) computer choices adds complexity for faculty, but it has been my observation that much of the faculty use non-Microsoft software and that students, like myself, would be willing to provide assistance.

In closing, I expect nothing to be done and this letter to be ignored. Thank you for your time and making my time at the University of Waterloo so enjoyable from a computing resources perspective.

Sincerely,



Andre Masella