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Google's popular e-mail client available for use

The University sent out the first invitations Wednesday, offering the new service.

By **Jerimiah Oetting**   November 11, 2009 (3 years ago)

After nearly a year of negotiating and testing, the University of Minnesota will begin offering Google's suite of applications to undergraduates throughout the next month.

Google's e-mail service, Gmail, will be offered in addition to the University's local e-mail service, GopherMail.

The University sent out the first of its invitations Wednesday, offering the new service to first-year students in the Carlson School of Management, project manager Dan Wagner said.

"We'll start sending invitations to others in the freshman class probably early next week," he said. "After that we'll go sophomore, junior [and] senior."

Gmail will not be offered to faculty and staff yet, Wagner said

"Faculty may have research data and that kind of thing more so than students," he said. "We're doing due diligence to reassure faculty and staff that data will be secure."

University Health Privacy Officer Ross Janssen said the University is negotiating a business associate agreement with Google to ensure protection of health and medical information.

"[Google] won't go to any faculty, staff or student that have access to health information until we've got all of the assurances we need," he said.

Bernard Gulachek, senior director of strategy management for the Office of Information Technology, said offering Google's services came in response to popular demand.

"Approximately 18 percent of our faculty and staff and 12 percent of our students are forwarding existing e-mail addresses off campus," he said. "The majority of those forwards are going to the Google space."

In addition to providing e-mail service, Google will also provide the applications in its Google Apps Education Edition suite.

"We know this is a popular suite of tools," Gulachek said.

For Gulachek, the tools increase the ability for University students and faculty to collaborate, a key motive behind the University's implementation of Google's infrastructure.

The tools include Google Docs, which allows users to work together on word processing, spreadsheets and slideshow presentations within the Google space, according to the Google Apps Education Edition Web site.

While a large number of students and faculty already use Google for personal e-mail, Gulachek said there are important differences in the University's negotiated terms and conditions.

Gulachek said under the terms and conditions of a personal Gmail account, the information put into the Google space is the property of Google.

"That is not the case with the University's terms of agreement," he said.

If potentially sensitive information is forwarded from GopherMail to a personal Gmail account, then it becomes the property of Google.

"Without the protection of terms and conditions, then that could potentially represent a risk to this institution," Gulachek said.

However, Gulachek said he believes that with the contract negotiated by the University, information is safer even if it's not stored locally.

"Google services are equal to or superior to the architecture and technology that we use today," he said.

The outsourcing of e-mail follows a recent trend among colleges across the nation. St. Paul's Hamline University switched to Google's infrastructure at the beginning of the academic year.

"The students were very much in favor," said Harry Pontiff, director of special projects and information security at Hamline. "Their attitudes were more like 'What took you so long?' "

Pontiff said Google's servers are maintained by a team of technicians, making them more reliable.

With the applications Google offers as part of its Google Apps Education Edition suite, there may be room to cut costs by ending services currently supported by the University.

"We have not decided yet that we are going to stop running services," Gulachek said.

He cited the University's calendar system as possibly being replaced by Google's in the future.

"This fall is really a testing ground for us," he said.