 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

TECH STAR

## UT expert key to Austin's supercomputer status

### Jay Boisseau is credited with moving university into elite ranks.

By [Kirk Ladendorf](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Sunday, May 25, 2008

Jay Boisseau, widely credited with bringing the University of Texas from Nowheresville to near the front of the pack in the world of supercomputing, "is a force of nature," says UT Earth scientist Omar Ghattas.

Visitors to his office find the 43-year-old director of the Texas Advanced Computing Center full of energy as he talks about favorite subjects including science, computing and UT athletics. He leans well forward in his desk chair, closing the distance from his listener, like a panther about to pounce.

Boisseau brought that enthusiasm to UT when he arrived from the University of California at San Diego in 2001, building the technical staff and winning impressive bids to build and run advanced computers. The grand prize came in 2006, when his team outbid better-known computer centers around the country to take the first grant awarded by the National Science Foundation in years to build a major supercomputer. That machine, Ranger, went into operation this year at UT.

"He is really something special," said Larry Faulkner, former UT president and now head of the Houston Endowment. Boisseau, he says, is playing in "the big leagues, and it is notable that he wins repeatedly."

"He should get enormous credit for an almost unprecedented turnaround in an academic computing center," says Larry Smarr, a computer researcher at UC-San Diego.

Boisseau's goals are in synch with UT's: "I want world-class discovery to be conducted here on a daily basis. That was one of my big reasons for coming here."

One of his biggest strengths, Smarr said, is a background spent working closely with users of high-performance machines who need help getting their software to run right.

Boisseau became a computer expert on the way to his master's degree in astronomy at UT in 1990 and began his doctoral research by modeling supernovae. He landed a job at a regional supercomputing center at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks in 1994. He moved less than two years later to the San Diego Supercomputing Center, a powerhouse in scientific computing, where he was named associate director in 2001. Then UT came calling.

Colleagues in California told him UT was too far down in the pecking order of advanced computing to ever amount to much. Boisseau hesitated, but he says that skepticism eventually made him determined to prove them wrong.

UT, indeed, had a lot of ground to make up: Consultants had said in the late 1990s that its lack of standing in high-end technical computing eventually would undermine its reputation as a top research university.

Though UT promised Boisseau additional staff and other resources to improve the computing center, much would depend on his ability to win grants for powerful new systems.

Boisseau said part of his team's success in winning bids has been to find the right hardware and software design for a high-end system and then to clearly state the advantages to scientists of using such a system.

Outsiders put it another way.

"The strongest thing that Jay had going for him with Ranger was the partnership with Sun (Microsystems, which developed the computer hardware)," said Thom Dunning, who heads the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois. "It really takes a partner that is in the computer business that allowed them to take a step beyond what everyone else proposes" in terms of system performance for a given cost.

Winning Ranger was just a first step. Now, UT's team must show it can support the needs of the scientists who use it. That's where UT has yet to show it is on a par with the established players at San Diego, the Pittsburgh Supercomputing Center and the University of Illinois, among others.

"It is the new-kid-in-town syndrome," Smarr says. "Everyone wishes Jay the best, but they still have to prove themselves."

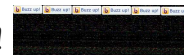
And the race never ends, says Sid Karin, director emeritus of the San Diego Supercomputer Center.

"The technology is changing rapidly. It is a rapidly moving target. And if you relax, someone else is going to get there first," Karin says.

"You don't ever get to stop. It can wear people out. But I don't think Jay is anywhere near being worn out."

kladendorf@statesman.com; 445-3622


Vote for this story!



---

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/05/25/0525boisseau.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.