CNS /Update Newsletter Feature

Networked Classrooms Coming to UF

CNS Document ID: u001201a
Last Updated: 12/01/00

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CIRCA, with assistance from NERDC, has launched an ambitious program to make classrooms across the UF campus fully wired with telephone service and Ethernet connections to the Internet. Despite often inadequate equipment space, cables that sometimes had to be tunneled through cement, and voluminous telecommunications standards, the Networked Classrooms initiative is well underway, with some classrooms already completely wired and in use.

Senior Engineer Plant Rodgers and Senior Systems Programmer Todd Hester, both of CIRCA, head the group that planned, designed, and is implementing the project. Rodgers explained that the planning and design phases included physical assessments of the classroom buildings. "We had to become familiar with the buildings; locate existing cable infrastructure, calculate distances between classrooms, and even take digital pictures of existing telephone closet spaces," he said. "[The telephone closets] were built only to house telephone switching equipment. Now we had to find space for equipment racks, fiber risers, cable management devices, and ventilation and cooling for all of the hardware."

Running cable between the classrooms and the BPoP (building point-of-presence) also presented challenges in some existing buildings. "The newer classroom buildings, such as the new Physics building, had these considerations already designed into them," said Dr. Sue Legg, director of UF's Office of Instructional Resources, which includes CIRCA. Rodgers said that in the older buildings, conduits had to be built to house the cable through hallways and ceilings and even concrete.

Aside from the physical installation, many other details had to be considered. Among these were obtaining Environmental Health and Safety permits, acquiring UF decals for equipment, configuring all the new hardware, and testing connections to meet ANSI/EIA/TIA 568-A standards (a host of rules regarding data and telecommunications devices.)

In the classrooms themselves, the equipment needed includes multimedia boxes, cabling and molding to conceal it, voice, data, and video jacks, and phone equipment. When all is complete, a dedicated phone set in each networked classroom will connect directly to a help desk in case of equipment malfunction. Another bonus for faculty, Legg pointed out, is that the classrooms are all set up the same so that computers taken from one classroom to another will not have to be reconfigured.

Approximately 36 classroom buildings on campus are undergoing these upgrades. Overall copper installation into classrooms is 90% complete. Some rooms are completed and are currently being used. Assistant Professor Joachim Hammer of CISE is one instructor who has used the networked classrooms. "I keep my lectures on the Web, and it is very easy to pull them up in the classroom. If the lecture goes in a different direction, I can call up more information on the spot. Things are doable that were impossible before. I wouldn't want to go back to a non-wired classroom."

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