CNS /Update Newsletter Feature

FIRNTEC Grows Internet Access for Florida Educators

CNS Document ID: u961105a
Last Updated: 7/19/99

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At a time when enthusiasm for linking educators and students to computer networks is at an all-time high, NERDC is pleased to host a valuable staff resource in the person of Eileen Heather, a "FIRNTEC" (technical education consultant) for the Florida Information Resource Network (FIRN).

NERDC personnel helped design FIRN in 1986. The vision was to provide computer connectivity and computer applications to public educators working throughout Florida.

"At the time, we used a train analogy," recalls Marie Dence, NERDC associate director. "People could get on the train (network) at any station, and they could stop off at any other station."

The network NERDC helped plan has prospered and kept pace with new technologies. Meanwhile, Heather has watched educational computing and FIRN's customer base grow in tandem.

"Our senior generation of educators," says Heather, "are much less fearful of computers now -- and for the new teachers, why, it's old hat. Four years ago, few people knew about FIRN. Today, the majority of Florida educators know it and use it, and professors throughout the state are promoting telecommunications."

As an organization, FIRN is now a part of the Florida Department of Education, and the Legislature-funded network itself is accessible at no cost to qualified patrons through 600 local phone numbers in 47 locations through-out Florida.

From her base at NERDC, Heather provides support to FIRN's K-12, community college, and university customers in an 11-county area, including Alachua and neighboring counties. As a FIRNTEC, Heather teaches educators how to use FIRN's applications and network, and how to connect to the Internet via FIRN. Since it upgraded its dialup modem pool to 28,800 bps in 1995 (previous access was 2,400 bps), FIRN has been able to offer PPP access to FIRN and
the Internet, and support for graphical World Wide Web browsers. Not surprisingly, the enhanced access has accelerated FIRN's growth -- up to 150 new educators climb aboard the network every day -- and much of the training and consulting Heather does revolves around connectivity issues.

"The ultimate beneficiaries of all this connectivity are Florida students," said Dence, "and Eileen is a valuable liaison, keeping us in touch with educational computing throughout the state. UF's future students are now in Florida schools, so it's very helpful to have someone on our staff working with them."

NERDC houses and maintains a major hub of FIRN network hardware; and direct links between the two systems enable many NERDC customers traveling around the state to sign on to their NERDC accounts from any FIRN location.

But FIRN customers, naturally, use FIRN applications once they are connected to FIRN. These include FIRNmail, a statewide group conferencing system, the Lynx Internet browser, file transfer software, a system for electronic student transcript distribution (heavily used by UF administrators), and FIRN's array of instructional services.

Heather trains users in all these systems. Since she is only one person (and one of only 10 FIRNTECs), Heather employs train-the-trainer programs; she teaches individual educators to be FIRN instructors, who in turn, train colleagues and students. For this purpose Heather and other FIRNTECs have developed printed materials and a curriculum that evolves along with the technology FIRN uses.

Heather uses her training skills at UF's College of Education, where the bulk of UF's FIRNmail account holders work or study. Most of them are graduate students poised to make their mark as teachers in Florida schools. "They will go into the workplace," Heather says, "with a foundation in the specific network procedures, tools, and FIRN instructional resources already in use by their colleagues."

"Having Eileen at NERDC is a wonderful opportunity to enhance our good working relationship with FIRN," said Dence.

Your Comments are Welcome

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