CNS /Update Newsletter Feature

Kiosks Supply Plethora Of Information in One Box

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UF Information Technology

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From a blue box shaped like an overgrown ATM, a student can look at her records, a lost visitor can find his location on campus, a staff member can look up campus activities, and much more.

Tom Cassarly, coordinator for education and training for University of Florida's Information Systems, presented the capabilities of these blue boxes, better known as UF kiosks, to NERDC's Instruction and Research (I&R) Users' Committee recently. The kiosks take advantage of the campus core network which NERDC maintains.

Touching a kiosk's screen brings up the following choices: a welcome video from UF President Lombardi, Student Records, Campus Map, Student FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), About Our Campus, Schedule of Courses, and UF News & Events.

"We want to provide as many information and transaction types of service as possible and allow users to pay fines, fees, get course information so you don't have millions of people lining up at Criser. They (users) can pay a parking fee at two in the afternoon or two in the morning," Cassarly said.

Thanks to videos, stereo speakers, and a subwoofer housed in orange and blue custom-built cabinets, users can also watch and listen to several audio and video clips created by News and Public Affairs about the campus.

Students can look up their financial aid status, course schedules, admissions information, critical dates, and grades; register and drop/add classes; or request transcripts via a link to the ISIS server. NERDC runs and maintains ISIS in conjunction with the Office of the University Registrar.

"The Registrar's (Web) pages seem to be the pages students want to get to the most," Cassarly continued.

All this information is available free from 10 kiosks located on campus.

Through the news and events link, you can search for activities at UF based on several criteria: athletics, free, the arts, etc.

The kiosks supply this information at the touch of a screen via a Web interface. A trial is now being conducted to test the use of a debit/credit card interface so students can pay tuition, fines, and other debts, and receive a printed receipt.

The magic of this wealth of information and interactivity is courtesy of commonly available computer components inside each cabinet: a Dell GX series 133 MHz Pentium with 32 MB of RAM and a 1 GB disk drive, a Mitsubishi/MicroTouch 15" touch screen, and a Lexmark Optra LX+ laser printer inside the Factura cabinet. An Atalla PIN pad and Magnatec receipt printer are attached to the cabinet. Ethernet or token ring connections hold it all together. While a 1 GB hard drive may seem large for a computer whose only task is to run a Web browser, each kiosk's drive stores several videos so that they run at normal speed and don't bog down the network each time a user wishes to view one.
Only the cabinet and a locally written software program are custom to UF's kiosks. Microsoft Internet Explorer, with the addition of the custom software running concurrently, displays the information. The UF-specific program prevents kiosk users from following Web links that would lead outside the UF information environment.

The fully loaded custom cabinet weighs about 700 pounds and has no horizontal surfaces. These two features make the kiosk difficult to move and prevent anyone from sitting on it or perching their belongings.

While difficult to relocate, UF took a kiosk to the Florida Government Technology Conference, which was held in Tallahassee in September '97, to demonstrate it. Officials there were impressed with the blue box's performance.

Information Systems' staff maintains the kiosks mostly from afar, except for the printers. Having a laser printer as a part of the package demands that someone visit the kiosks regularly to refill the paper, and eventually replace the toner.

Other tasks, such as checking to ensure the machines are still functioning properly, are done through a software program called Remotely Possible. Remotely Possible allows users to access a computer "long-distance." IS staffers check the machines five to six times a day and are happy to report that 90 to 95 percent of the time, the machines are up and running.

During the rare times when the kiosks are down, IS staff members have usually been able to revive them without having to leave the office by using Remotely Possible. Occasionally, though, they do have to make a "house call" and see the ailing computer in person: face to screen.

Servers across campus distribute the information: Information Systems' kiosk server handles the starting screen, IFAS serves up the Campus Map, News and Public Affairs' server handles the calendar and events, and the Registrar's serves up ISIS (the Integrated Student Information System) via NERDC.

There have been some misunderstandings about the kiosks, though. If at certain times things are unavailable, people tend to think it's the kiosk's fault -- it's usually not. It's because the server is busy. If the server is busy, it is busy no matter where you connect from: your home, on-campus, a CIRCA lab, or a dorm room, Cassarly said.

As for the future? UF is thinking about adding more kiosks. And CIRCA has shown interest in expanding the selections to include some functions of GatorLink.

"We probably have a laundry list of things we'd like to add," Cassarly said.

Your Comments are Welcome

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send your comments to:

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