Information Technology Initiative
For Business Students, Laptop Computers are New Link Between Classroom and Workplace

Computers have changed the way we do business. Now, in an effort to make learning relevant to the world business students experience after graduation, they’re becoming integral to the classroom.

During the 2000-2001 academic year, students in a number of business classes at Minnesota State University, Mankato used IBM ThinkPad laptop computers as part of their business curriculum for the first time. They were the first to participate in MSU’s College of Business Information Technology Initiative, a program designed by educators to give students the computer skills and information they need to function naturally in a computer-reliant business world.

The Initiative is changing the way instructors conduct classes, communicate with students, and manage student information. It also alters the way students organize their lives, access information, retain classroom notes and other data, and work with fellow students.

Tiffany Rickert, a College of Business Marketing major, was one of 120 students who used the laptops during the past academic year. She found the change “amazing” and quickly became a proponent of the program with other students.

“This laptop became part of me,” she says. “It’s a wonderful machine. The College of Business worked hard to get the top-of-the-line. Because the College has its own server we have fast access, printers near at hand, and the ability to use our computers almost anywhere on campus, including outside!”

Rickert and other students participating in the pilot program had the option of leasing a notebook from the College or using a laptop they already owned. Based on the experience with the pilot program, the College has adopted a purchase-only option. Students now entering MSU and majoring in the College of Business will be required to purchase a specific laptop through the University’s Campus Computer Store. The Dell laptop is equipped with a modem, Ethernet, and wireless access to the Internet; a cd-rw drive; and business-related software that is used in the classroom. Laptops are imaged for instructors to project an image from the computer screen to a large white board with a finger to replicate the function of a computer mouse. A Smart Board, a classroom tool that allows faculty to project an image from the computer screen to a large white board, a special pen is used to write on the board, or the professor can tap the board with a finger to replicate the function of a computer mouse. A “picture” of the image can then be saved to the College server, where students can access it at any time with their wireless computers.

Students find these changes a natural for learning. Former College of Business Dean Norm Solomon observed in an interview with Mankato Free Press writer Dan Niesmeier last September, “We didn’t grow up with this, but our students have. Having a highly wired environment is something college students coming out of high school expect. It also gives them great exposure to the way things work in business now.”

Tiffany Rickert’s enthusiasm for the program testifies to the value of the Initiative. “I’m a lot more efficient, and work more effectively in groups, and have a personal tool to organize our lives. Did even better, we got out of the computer labs!”

The Information Technology Initiative is being phased in over a period of four years. The first year, 1999-2000, was a preparation year for faculty. College of Business faculty received their notebook computers and began attending workshops on webpage development and on-line resources. In preparation for the 2000-2001 academic year, two classrooms were converted from traditional lecture halls to active-learning environments. The new classrooms were designed to be more like conference rooms. Camps, tables that accommodate teamwork, and multimedia equipment were priorities in the rooms’ configuration. Eight business classes that utilized notebook applications were offered during the second year of the phase-in. Students who enrolled in these classes were volunteers. Beginning this year, Fall 2001, all students who entered MSU during the 2000-2001 year are required to have notebook computers and enroll in business courses with laptop applications. Thirty-four courses will be offered this fall. This summer, one additional classroom was converted to the new learning environment. The final year of the phase-in, 2002-2003, will see the incorporation of technology into all courses offered in the College of Business and a notebook computer in the hands of every College of Business student. The dream will become a reality.

In the classroom, professors are finding new ways to share information, organize, and facilitate student learning. Many choose to take full advantage of a technology system that is a tool for managing grades, classroom communications, and curriculum sources online. Faculty have also created their own web pages and on-line materials to enhance their classes. Syllabi, assignments, links to business sites, and even some “information about me” can be accessed via the web pages. An entire class can access these sources simultaneously.

Faculty are also using the Smart Board, a classroom tool that allows instructors to project an image from the computer screen to a large white board. A special pen is used to write on the board, or the professor can tap the board with a finger to replicate the function of a computer mouse. A “picture” of the image can then be saved to the College server, where students can access it at any time with their wireless computers.

The laptop becomes a personal tool for students, one used inside and outside of the classroom to organize, communicate, access information, and complete classroom work.