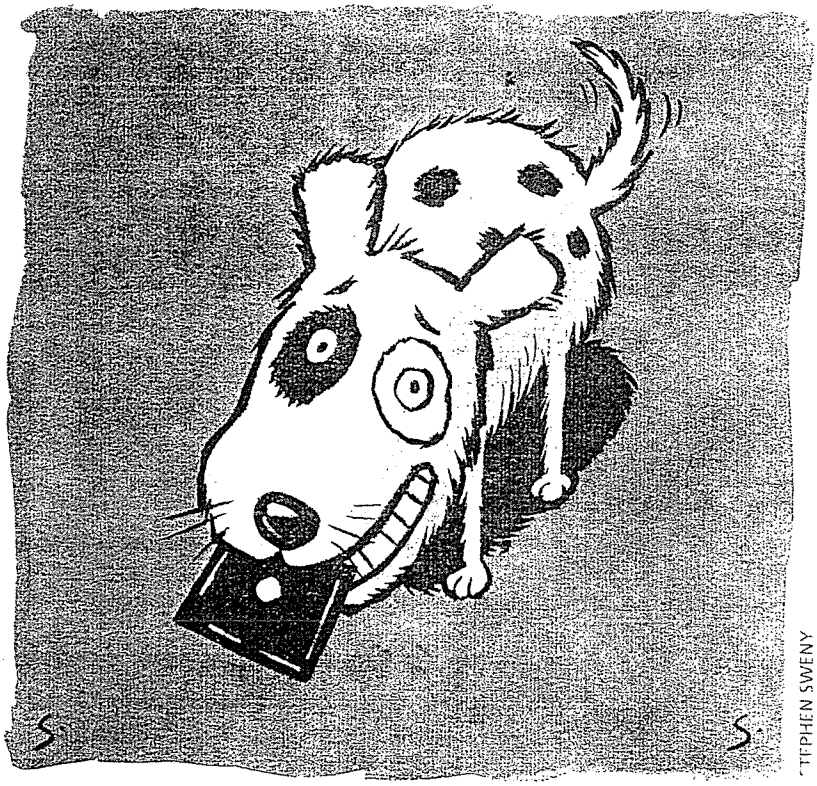

STEPHEN SWENY

The Dog Ate My Diskette

The bold Information Technology Project is ushering in a new era for higher education.

By Ellen Fix

NO MORE PENCILS, NO MORE BOOKS, NO MORE TEACHERS...

Well, you know the rest. But what you may not know is that this end-of-school anthem is now an academic decree at two Atlanta area colleges.

That's because all 3,000 students at Floyd College in Rome and 5,000 others at Clayton College and State University are trading their old-fashioned No. 2s for state-of-the-art laptops.

The mandate is part of a bold initiative, known as the Information Technology Project (ITP), mapped out by the University System of Georgia Board of Regents. Only a handful of colleges in the US are integrating information technology into the classroom as aggressively.

Through UPITA (Universal Personal Information Technology Access), each student and faculty member is equipped with a powerful 166Mhz multimedia notebook PC with 24-hour remote communications capability including "anywhere" dial-in access to the Clayton and Floyd campuses, GALILEO (the state's digital library), the Internet and e-mail.

Currently, each student at the 2 campuses pays approximately $200 per quarter to rent a notebook — valued at $4,000 retail, with upgrades every 3 years.

The schools purchase the machines at considerable educational discounts, and receive supplemental funding for support services, assistance and repair from the state lottery and private allocations. Wachovia Bank, Earthlink, Xircom, Microsoft and Arsys are among ITP's business partners.

ITP was spearheaded by 2 forward-thinking college presidents, Dr. Richard Skinner at Clayton and Floyd's Dr. Lynn Cundiff. Says Cundiff, "By 2005, 80% of the people in Georgia will need personal computer skills to get a job. Now, only 20% do. If we're going to be viable in the future economy, we need computer fluency, not just computer literacy. Employees will have to use multiple software packages and apply them in various situations."

A pervasive need for technology

ITP is a long way from the days when students had to sign up to use small, cramped, limited-access computer labs. The notebooks are outfitted with Microsoft Works software, so students get daily, hands-on experience with today's most popular business programs, including spreadsheets, word processing, data communications and graphics.

"The need for people with technological ability is pervasive; it's an integral part of everything we do," Skinner says.

Greg Moss, a 34-year-old Floyd student headed for degrees in chemistry and math, thinks the computer experience will give students a "great business advantage. Growing up, the closest thing to a computer I had was an Atari. When I went to college years ago, in my accounting class I had an old copy of Lotus and it was a nightmare.

"Now, you have the world at your fingertips, as they say. When I got on the Web, I couldn't put it down. There's just a wealth of knowledge out there."

Brent Weaver, associate professor of music in his 11th year at Clayton, says, "A lot of students complained at first, but now they're say-

ing. 'How cool — I can go out and use these skills when I graduate.' " One of Weaver's students, for example, is developing valuable marketing skills by creating a website to promote his rock band.

Aside from preparing students for the workforce, the notebooks are enhancing the traditional academic experience, another key goal of ITP. Many textbooks now include CD-ROM tutorials that are completely interactive. And every student can now obtain information from scholars, politicians, authors, journalists, composers — you name it — at all hours of the day.

Obtaining all the latest information

Via the college Ethernet line, students can access special academic websites and subject-specific learning programs. Music students, for example, learn theory, practice sight-reading and listen to German and Italian librettos using sophisticated sight-and-sound software.

In some subjects, like healthcare management, by the time a textbook is published, it's actually obsolete. Using materials from the Web gives the student relevant, up-to-the minute data.

And as a sheer time saver, the notebooks can't be beat, a significant benefit to the majority of the student bodies at both schools, whose average age is 28. Most are employed full-time, and many are single parents. Time is their most precious commodity.

Paul Webber, a 43-year-old Floyd student and a 22-year vet of the Rome police department, is taking a class in geology, and is currently assembling a website on sedimentary structures.

Webber effuses, "I've sat in parking lots when I'm doing sidejobs, and done my homework. Then I'll e-mail it to the professor when I get home. It's a nearly paperless environment. You don't need a library, because you're basically in the library when you're in the GALILEO site. We can also add other programs and files to our notebooks; some students are using them to keep track of their personal banking."

Skinner concedes while the Web can "give students a lot more information than any one teacher can possibly convey," ITP is not trying to replicate the classroom experience electronically, nor do away with books. "You have to drive the technology, and not let the technology drive you."

Some teachers were reluctant to integrate computers into their classrooms. Now, however, they're enthused and challenged by the new connectivity. And they're enjoying the fruits of their foray into technology, the effects of which have, in some cases, been dramatic.

Teachers are moving away from acting as the proverbial "sage on the stage." As Weaver puts it, "My function is changing. I'm being more of a guide than a tutor. It's much more stimulating for the student, and enjoyable for both of us. Web learning will never replace a piano lesson, but it definitely augments the learning process."

Dr. Blaine Carpenter, a biology professor who has taught at Clayton for 26 years and is the academic director of distance learning, concurs. "Before, I'd give a lecture and they'd take notes. Now, since they've downloaded the lecture ahead of time, I discuss everything in a seminar format. Rather than jotting down bunches and bunches of facts, the notes they take in class are driven by questions they ask in class."

Clayton and Floyd students can already earn degrees via interactive video classes, and through courses beamed to students in their homes or at work by Georgia Public Broadcasting and local cable providers. The

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ultimate goal, according to Carpenter, is to give students options that are convenient and efficient: a mixture of on-line and telecourses, plus the classroom experience if needed.

The need to learn never ends

According to Carpenter, early anecdotal evidence suggests students are enrolling in more quarter hours than normal, because the electronic options allow them more time to study.

Students are noticeably more actively engaged in their education. "They're not hiding in closets staring at their laptop screens like one might think," says Skinner. "Since computers are now so ubiquitous on campus, everyone's out there sharing information with everyone else. Our vision is that by connecting students the need to learn will never end."

This vision is beginning to be realized. According to Donna McCarty, a Clayton associate professor of psychology and the coordinator of assessment and faculty development, students have begun to bond. They're collaborating more, working on projects as a team. "You see people in the cafeteria having lively debates, looking over someone's shoulder toward their screen, or helping each other troubleshoot. It's refreshing."

Of course, current academic methodologies have yet to adapt fully to the electronic culture. Professors are struggling to manage the huge volume of incoming student e-mail.

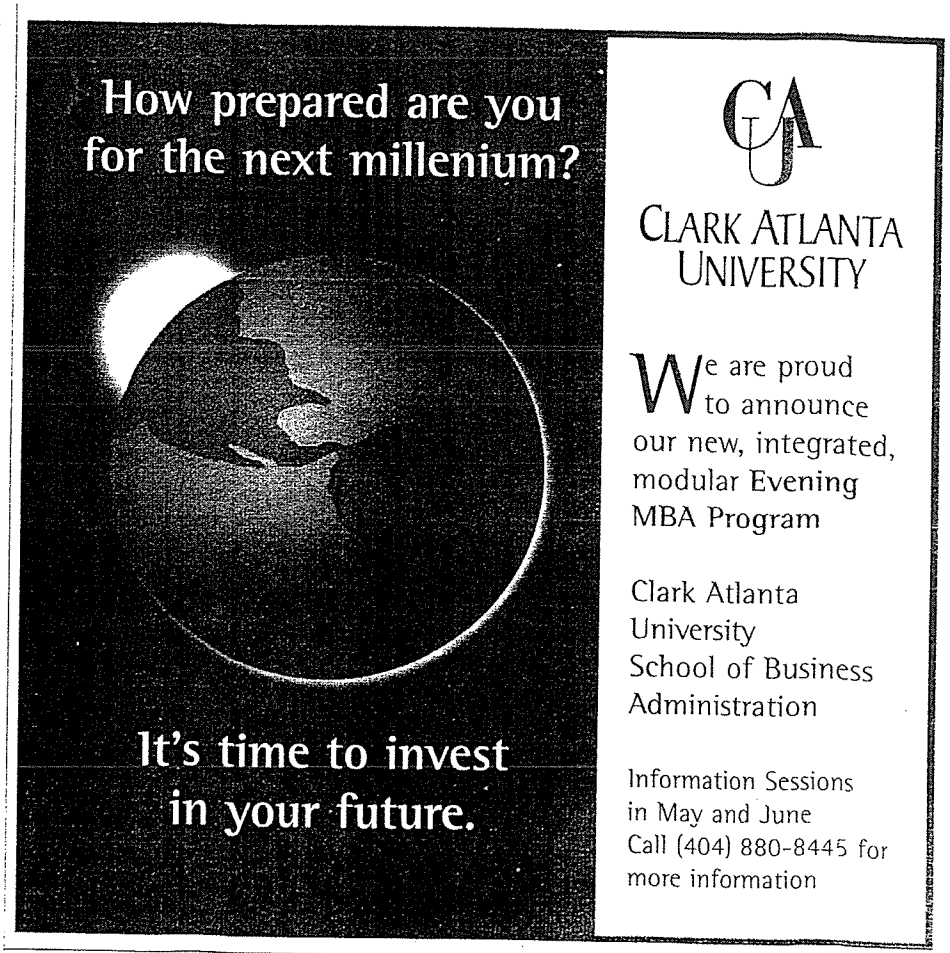
Training students and faculty is time-consuming. And some students still have the same old excuses for not turning in their assignments — couched in new terminology. "The dog ate my homework" has been replaced with, "My diskette got eaten by the floppy drive," or "My 2-year-old hid my diskette somewhere in his toy box."

In addition, technical infrastructure and support services are lacking due to limited funds. The help desk is often busy — or down. One teacher complains of waiting "almost an hour before I could dial in to retrieve e-mail and get on-line from off campus." And security measures will have to be instituted before computerized testing can be legitimized.

Still, Cundiff believes ITP will "set a new standard for education in this country."

As one teacher observes, "Most of the students are beginning to enjoy being able to work at home, and for the first time since this began, I think that we are going to get through this."

ITP is not a panacea for all that's wrong with education today. But it's certainly accomplishing things that seem awfully right for the 21st century.



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