Launching A Learning Center -
A Case Study

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Resource considerations often limit the degree to which educational institutions are able to duplicate technology-based successes that are commonplace in industry. For this reason, despite consistent reports of the success of interactive videodisc-based instruction in industry, many educational institutions have been slow to adopt the technology. In 1988, California State University, Fullerton initiated activities that resulted in establishing an interdisciplinary interactive videodisc learning center. Although the center was created on a minimal budget, the goals, standards, and procedures that were defined, indicate that even within budgetary limitations, industry successes can be replicated at public universities.

Personal computers have become a commonplace tool found on the desks of an increasingly large number of company employees. Even most underfunded educational institutions have established personal computer work centers for students and faculty. Software vendors have recognized the nature of these mass user environments and have established flexible pricing policies for their products. For example, site licenses are often available for companies that require multiple copies or networked versions of spreadsheets or wordprocessors. To address the needs of educational institutions, many software vendors have formed liaisons with textbook publishers to provide reduced function versions of software for student use (Reisman, 1987).

These kinds of arrangements work well for most personal computer tasks. However, for applications that require special hardware or unique software, they can be completely irrelevant. For example, applications that use CD ROM's or optical videodiscs require relatively expensive disc drives. Although the cost of these devices continues to decline, their general unavailability still restricts their use to computer configurations more likely to be found in the office or in a PC work center.

Similarly, the kinds of software that must be used in these environments tend to be more expensive than conventional PC application software. For example, while the price of CD ROM-based software does compare to the price of soft-
ware sold on magnetic media (floppy disks), the price of laserdisc-based software is often much higher. It is not unusual for a single videodisc-based training course to cost more than $2,000. And unlike their magnetic media-based counterparts, the physical properties of laserdiscs and laserdisc players preclude their use by more than one person at a time (i.e. - they cannot be networked or timeshared).

These economic factors can inhibit the use of laserdisc products, even though it may be clear that the technology can provide significant benefits to its users. For example, many studies have shown conclusively that interactive videodisc can be a superior instructional medium (DeBloois, 1988). Unfortunately, the higher cost of videodisc workstations can be an obstacle for those who wish to use them.

Budgetary considerations are further exacerbated by the need to provide multiple copies of a single training course to meet the needs of groups of learners. While it is common practice for the companies that market these training materials to offer various payment alternatives and discounts for additional copies of a single course, the total price of materials can still be extremely high.

Businesses often perform cost-benefit analyses to justify these costs on the basis of factors that include higher employee productivity resulting from improved training (Gentry, 1989). Educational institutions however, usually cannot make equivalent analyses. In either case, the ability to determine the optimal (minimum) number of special workstations with associated application software can be a hit and miss proposition.

The Center at California State University, Fullerton

In 1988, faculty members at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) began to plan for the operation of an Interactive Videodisc Learning Center (IVLC) to be located on the main floor of the University’s library (Reisman, 1989). The issues needing to be addressed were diverse and complex. The IVLC was conceived as a facility that would provide multi-disciplinary access to individualized learning materials within a very traditional university environment. The challenge was to determine policies and practices that would provide the benefits of interactive videodisc (IVD) within the day-to-day routines and practices of campus life, at the lowest expense. While the experiences and models developed by others provided a measure of advice (Parkhurst & Grauer, 1989), few have focused on how to accomplish similar goals on a shoestring budget.

In February, 1989, the Center undertook a study to assess a variety of issues that related to the operation of the IVLC. The following items were addressed through the course of this study:

- Selection of workstations.
- Selection of appropriate instructional programs.
- Selection of videodisc learning materials.
- Operation in an individualized learning environment.
- Minimizing courseware costs.
- Determining learning center operating schedules.
- Operation within the constraints of a semester-based program.
- Student testing.
- Student attendance.

In summary, however, the main purpose of the study was to determine how to offer as many courses as possible to as many students as possible, as effectively as possible, all at the lowest expense possible.

Selection Of Workstations

CSUF, like many other universities provides students with access to personal computer laboratories. Each of these PC centers contains 30 to 40 personal computers - enough machines to meet the demands of student computing on the basis of seven day, 24 hour access. These labs are staffed by graduate students who oversee the secu-
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