

Cullen College of Engineering

Information Systems and Services & Instructional Technologies



University of Houston

Fall 2009 Newsletter

MESSAGE FROM THE ASSOCIATE DEAN

Dear Cullen College of Engineering Faculty, Staff and Student,

Welcome to Fall 2009 semester! We are bringing out a brand new issue of newsletter with interesting articles and useful information on computing and instructional technology resources. In this issue you will find an article about Online Distance Education and the funding that we have received to develop some of our programs online. You will also enjoy reading article on "Netbook" that are becoming popular in the market place. Additionally, you will find the upgrades that we have made in our computer labs. We have also included the Hours of Operation for our labs and contact information as well as useful links that you will find helpful.

We are committed to meeting your computing needs and are always on the lookout to find better ways to serve you. If you have any suggestions or comments to improve our services we would like to hear from you.

Suresh Khator
Associate Dean, Engineering
Information Systems & Services

Online Distance Education?

Distance, work and travel time constraints prevent a number of potential students from attending classes offered at the University of Houston in the traditional face-to-face format.

Taking into consideration that a number of students interested in earning a graduate degree are working adults with families, the student's workday schedule and commute time become important factors. Different time zones, national holidays, daylight savings time, and technical problems create issues for synchronous national and international delivery of distance education courses. It becomes apparent that the success of a distance education (DE) course and program must include an asynchronous component.

A proposed model which would maximize resources includes offering degree program courses with a face-to-face section on campus in conjunction with an online section. The face-to-face lectures would be captured using Mediasite*, and then made available as a streaming video for DE student viewing online. (Mediasite also offers the option for DE students to view the lecture synchronously via the Internet.) All course content, access to streaming videos, and course communication tools would be available through Blackboard - a password-protected course management system supported by the Cullen College of Engineering. The lecture videos would also be available to the face-to-face students for review purposes.

In addition to assisting an engineer attain their educational goal, an online engineering degree program would be aligned with the mission of the university and the federal government to educate more members of the workforce in the STEM fields. An online degree program would serve engineers in the Houston metropolitan area, the state of Texas, and possibly beyond.

If you have questions regarding Mediasite and other DE technologies or special technology grant funding, please contact Debbie Boyer.

**Mediasite is a lecture-capture tool that records and syncs the audio, video and VGA signal of the lecture presentation, then automatically publishes it as a streaming video.*

Debbie Boyer
Instructional Technology Specialist

Engineering Computer Labs

ECC Hours of Operation
(W129 Engineering Building 2)
Mon-Thu: 8:00am - 11:00pm
Fri: 8:00am - 10:00pm
Sat-Sun: 12pm - 7pm

ECC Front Desk
713-743-4241

ECC Website
<http://ecc.egr.uh.edu>

EERC Hours of Operation*
(Building 594)
M-Thu: 10:00am - 5:30pm
Fri: 10:00am - 4:00pm
Sat-Sun: Closed

*The EERC schedule varies due to classes taught in the lab.

EERC Front Desk:
713-743-0673

EERC Website:
<http://eerc.egr.uh.edu>

Is Your Next Computer A Netbook?

The past year has seen the emergence of a new style subnotebook computer: small, light-weight (under 3 lbs.), long battery life (3 hours or more) and inexpensive (under \$400). These devices are designed to provide access to network services (e-mail, web browsing, conferencing, etc.), and basic local applications such as word processing. Dubbed "netbooks", these small computers offer big convenience at bargain prices. Of course, as with all computers, there are trade-offs. Understanding the benefits and limitations of the netbook will help you decide if one is right for you.

The netbooks achieve their excellent battery life by using a low-power processor designed by Intel, marketed under the name "Atom™". While these processors incorporate hyper-threading and run at a respectable 1.6GHz, they are not suitable for computationally intensive applications such as MATLAB. On the other hand, they are more than adequate for taking notes in class, web browsing and e-mail.

Other limitations are related to the small size and low-power requirements of the system. There is no built-in CD/DVD drive. For this, one must use an external USB drive. The standard memory offered on most models is 1GB, and the maximum RAM for those models that can use it is 2GB. This limitation, together with the somewhat slower processor speed, largely precludes resource-intensive operating systems such as Microsoft Vista (and that probably applies to Windows 7 as well). Most of these systems are offered with more efficient operating systems, such as Windows XP Home Edition and Ubuntu Linux. One vendor, Hewlett-Packard, offers a customized version of Ubuntu, cleverly hidden behind an attractive, easy to navigate graphical interface with large icons. The look and feel is not unlike that found on some of the best smart-phones.

Another consideration is in the choice of a disk drive. Many models now offer solid-state drives (similar to a USB flash drive) as the internal disk drive. However, these drives are generally much smaller than the comparable rotating disk drive, some as small as 8GB. While the solid-state drive will undoubtedly become more competitive in the future, most engineering students will require more disk space and should not consider a disk drive smaller than 30GB at the absolute minimum. Typical conventional disk drives would be 160GB or larger.

All models include both Ethernet 10/100BaseT and Wi-Fi network interfaces. Several offer optional WWAN networking (i.e., cellular mobile broadband) for those who need (and can afford) full mobile connectivity. Dell is now even offering an optional built-in GPS receiver. Of course, these options can significantly increase the price of a system.

The bottom line is that the netbook is not a general purpose computer, and it should not be considered as a replacement for a full-size laptop (or desktop) computer, which may cost a few hundred dollars more. On the other hand, for those who appreciate the unique advantages of an ultraportable computer at a very affordable price, and are content to work within these limitations, the new generation of netbook computers is very exciting. Remember: You only get what you pay for, so choose wisely.

John Young
Director,
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Engineering Information Systems & Services Contacts

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Upgrades to Computer Labs in the ECC

The ECC has recently upgraded two of our labs. We replaced the computers in Lab W129A with 32 Dell Optiplex 960 computers. These machines feature Intel Core 2 Duo E8400 processors, 4 GB RAM, DVD burners, and widescreen monitors. In addition to the computers, we have installed a new LCD projector and purchased new chairs for this lab. We have also upgraded the RAM in the computers located in W129B from 1GB to 3GBs.

Lab Software

If you want to use a software in your course and would want it to be installed in our

computer labs, please contact the lab manager. We need at least three weeks lead time to complete the installation. We will also need a copy of the signed license agreement that states that the software can be run in an open lab environment.

If you have any questions or comments about ECC labs, please contact the lab manager, Arturo Padilla, at 3-4414 or apadilla@uh.edu.

Arturo Padilla
Manager,
Engineering Computing Center

Charles F. (Charlie) Wilkins, III

Charles F. Wilkins, III, senior systems analyst, died July 2, 2009 after a year long battle with cancer. Charlie's primary areas of expertise were the UNIX/.Linux operating systems, and computer security. In the nearly 10 years he was with Engineering Computing, at one time or another, he maintained, updated and enhanced virtually every UNIX system in the College. For the past several years, Charlie also conducted introductory UNIX classes at the beginning of each semester. Charlie had a keen mind and very diverse and varied interests. He will be sorely missed, both as a colleague and a friend.

Engineering Education Resource Center Contacts

Debbie Boyer

*Instructional Technology
Specialist*

Blackboard Admin, User Support

Phone: 713-743-1347

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Anisa Maredia-Karim

Instructional Designer

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Vivek Thamizhmani

Idrees Mohammed

*Graduate Technology
Assistants*

Blackboard Training for TAs

Blackboard Basics for TAs workshops are scheduled at various times during the first two weeks of the semester. Though not mandatory, it is strongly recommended that your TA receive this training to better assist you and your students.

The hands-on workshop will cover *how to* and *best practices* for use of the following tools:

- Announcements (add, modify, delete, send as email)
- Digital Dropbox
- Send email (all students, individuals, groups)
- Assignment Tool
- Content (add, modify, "hide", delete)
- Gradebook
- External Links

Blackboard Basics for TAs Schedule:

1 st week of classes	Mon, Wed, Fri	Aug 24, 26, 28 at 10:00-11:30am
	Tues, Thurs	Aug 25, 26 at 12:00-1:30pm
2 nd week of classes	Wed, Fri	Sept 2, 3 at 10:00-11:30am
	Tues, Thurs	Sept 1, 3 at 12:00-1:30pm

TAs may register for the workshop at http://eerc.egr.uh.edu/TA_Request_Form.html, or by clicking on <http://eerc.egr.uh.edu> > Faculty Resources > TA Workshop Registration. The workshop is open to all current Bb Course Builders, Graders, TAs, and any interested faculty.



EERC Projects Receive Grant Funding

The Cullen College of Engineering continues to move forward with online course and program development and to provide the latest hardware and software applications to assist in the increased use of technology by Engineering students and faculty.

Debbie Boyer received a \$30,000 grant to implement three projects she identified to increase and improve the use of technology by Engineering students and faculty.

Project 1: The Engineering Computing Center (ECC) and Engineering Education Resource Center (EERC) computer labs will each be equipped with a presentation station which includes a mobile media cart, Sympodium (interactive pen displays similar to the Wacom and Tablet PC), document camera, and resident computer. The presentation station will provide a professional presentation podium for both students and instructors.

Project 2: Sympodiums will be installed in lecture rooms W122-D3 and 102-D to replace the 8-year-old Wacom tablets. The new equipment will reduce the likelihood of equipment failure during instructor or student presentations. Uniform presentation equipment installed in the lecture rooms and labs will also allow for consistency and easier use by faculty and students.

Project 3: The Mediasite lecture capture system will provide a solution for faculty to capture and easily publish their lectures for student review. This is seen as particularly helpful for student review and ultimately for retention of students in the masters programs since many master students' employers require them to travel for several weeks at a time during the semester. With a connection to the Internet, lecture capture will allow these students to login and stay current with the course material from anywhere in the world. Lecture capture will also aid in the development of online courses.

Helpful Hints and Best Practices

1. Please leave computers turned on, but logged off when leaving for the day. This will allow the security updates to be applied and scheduled back-ups to run.
2. Contact Kiet Luong or John Young before purchasing computer equipment to ensure functional and support compatibilities.
3. It is a good idea to log on with a user account and **not** an administrative account for daily computing. There are so many ways your computer can get infected with viri and trojans, therefore, logging on daily with an administrative account will almost guarantee infection on some level.

Useful Links

ECC Computer Lab Hours
EERC Computer Lab Hours
ECC/EERC Lab Computer Specifications
Software Available in ECC/EERC Labs
Software Available on Our Servers
Reserve Computer Labs (Faculty)
Reserve ECC Study Room Area (Students)
Other Computer Labs on Campus
UH Wireless Access
VPN Download - free
Anti-Virus Software Download - free
Cougar Byte
UH IT Help Desk

Please go to <http://ecc.eqr.uh.edu> or <http://eerc.eqr.uh.edu> for an electronic version of this newsletter with active links.

Bayou to be Retired

The server **Bayou**, operated by UH Information Technology, has been a mainstay for general purpose computing on campus for over a decade. However, as happens with all computers, it has reached its end-of-life (it is no longer possible to obtain replacement parts), and is scheduled to be retired from service by the end of summer. This system is based on the "Alpha" architecture first introduced by the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) in 1992, and ran Tru64 UNIX, one of earliest commercially available full 64-bit versions of the UNIX operating system.