Computing Together in Style

September 17, 2009

Office of Information Technology Opens New Lab

Setting off in a new direction, OIT recently opened The Alcove, a computing space where students can work together on team projects in a comfortable, roomy and pleasant environment using state-of-the-art equipment.

The Alcove is designed to enable small groups of students to gather around computers so they can jointly collaborate on projects, which can later be displayed on large wall-mounted LCD TVs, so other groups in the room can view and comment upon these presentations. This space is radically different from the many labs OIT has traditionally run around Rutgers, where computers are often crowded together to accommodate the thousands of students who drop in throughout the week to do some quick surfing on the web or to printout handouts they need for an upcoming class. How OIT ended up deciding to move in this new direction is a story of staff initiative, student involvement and cooperation among numerous parties throughout the university.

The tale begins in the 1990's, a time when many students did not own a computer, and those that did often had devices with limited capabilities.

Meanwhile, faculty had begun to incorporate computer technology into much of their coursework. To address the community's needs, Rutgers focused on transforming and expanding its computing centers. An emphasis was placed on packing computers into any space that could be made available. With technology advancing quite quickly, it became necessary to replace the equipment on a regular basis. To assist the novice users of the times, it was desirable to have a large enthusiastic student staff on hand to help patrons with their computing needs.

OIT had begun its travels down a necessary path - one of large centers containing many computers, regularly replaced by newer models and supported by a talented student staff. Momentum kept the organization on that path for the next decade and a half.

The New Computing World

But times have changed. Nowadays, students come to school with sophisticated computers, dormitories have Internet access, and smart phones are becoming more and more prevalent. The folks now running the computer centers noticed these trends and wondered about the future. Many of these individuals started as students workers during the period of expansion and understood how exciting, lively, and vital to academic community the labs could be. Was this era to end, or was there a way to reinvigorate the centers?

With this question on their minds, members of the staff decided to attend LabMan conferences to talk to individuals from other universities to see how they were handling this issue. LabMan is designed specifically for managers of computer labs from around the country to come together and share ideas.

Learning Spaces

In this setting, Rutgers staff first became interested in the idea of Learning Spaces. The term learning space is used when speaking of specially designed classroom environments that are properly equipped to facilitate group discussions and collaborative projects. Such spaces have become quite popular in universities throughout the country.

Maybe this was the answer to the question "where should Rutgers labs go in the future?" Sure, everyone has a computer, but where on campus can groups of students go to comfortably work on projects together? Not many places. Could the computer centers be transformed into such environments?

While at LabMan, the managers met colleagues from Temple University who courteously invited Rutgers staff to come visit their new TECH center which is quite popular on their campus. Within months, Rutgers had taken Temple up on its offer. In fact, a parade of staff, administrators and even students took trips to Temple, which graciously showed off their lab for each new Rutgers group that contacted them.

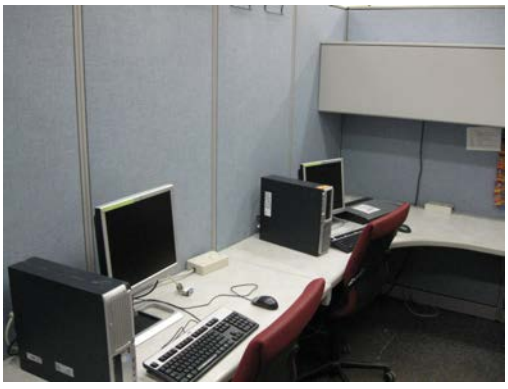
Students Chime In

Temple's TECH Center is quite impressive. This large center contains a variety of computing environments and learning spaces, all well-designed, roomy, aesthetically pleasing, comfortable and high tech. It is extremely popular, a place where students hang out much of the day.

It was not so clear, however, that such a center would be as popular with Rutgers students. Temple has many commuters, and the university is more contained with much of it being situated within a few city blocks in Philadelphia. To explore this question, Joe Sanders, a University Director for OIT, invited a number of student leaders at Rutgers to tour Temple with him. As Joe reported after the trip, "students were blown away - they said we should have something similar at Rutgers."

Tillett is Transformed

To explore learning spaces, a decision was made in late 2008 to transform the Livingston Computing Center in Tillett. It was realized that a staff area could be freed up, and turned into a small private space containing five computers that teams of students could reserve for collaborative projects.



This no cost plan was made feasible through the cooperation of Tina Sohn, at the Livingston Learning Center. The LLC agreed to allow the labs to relocate more computers into their nearby

facility which made the necessary swap of equipment among various rooms at Tillett possible. In the end, both the labs and the LLC benefited, and OIT's first computer learning space was made available to students. Throughout the spring, students enjoyed the new area as they collaborated on joint projects.

Leroy Wilkins, the manager of the Livingston computer centers explains, "Students appreciate having the Group Study Space available so they can work on projects together. Many have asked us if it would be possible to provide other similar spaces nearby, which possibly Rutgers could consider once space frees up at Tillett after the dining hall is relocated."

Creating An Inviting Space

While Tillett was being redone inexpensively by rearranging existing rooms, staff at College Avenue was hard at work on the Alcove. Working with space that recently become available adjacent to the existing College Avenue Computing Center, Melissa Malana Fullowan, the manager there, took the lead in designing a collaborative learning area from scratch. With the help of her assistant manager, Cody Burke, and her team of student employees, Melissa set about creating a space unlike any the computer centers had seen before.

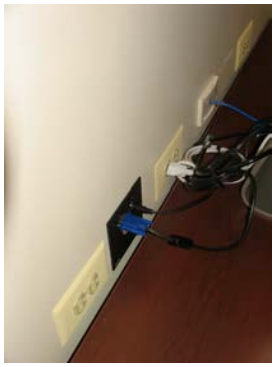
A focus was placed on ensuring the Alcove has the appropriate technology to support group projects while also being roomy, eye pleasing and comfortable. Features include an open design, well planned lighting, plants, collaborative worktables, lounge chairs, a couch, wireless access, 46-inch high-definition LCD screens, RU-tv, tabletop power outlets, and easy-to-use controls

Joint Effort

Focusing on getting the details right, Melissa worked closely with experts from many areas. This collaborative approach, though somewhat more involved, led to an impressive result.

Haworth representatives spent hours helping to select the appropriate furniture.

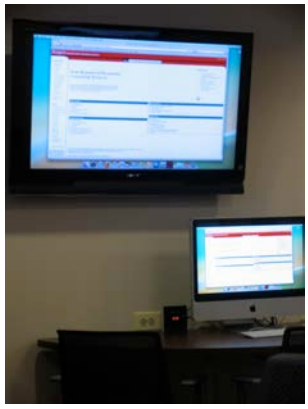
Pat Millett, from Facilities, served as Project Manager. Handling everything from electrical, to HVAC, to painting and carpeting, he continually adjusted to ever-changing plans, working closely with Melissa to fine-tune various elements as the work progressed.



Mike Salowe and his network installation team, worked closely with Pat and others to string network and TV cables through the walls and conduits. The care and detail put into this job ensured none of this infrastructure distracted from the aesthetics of the facility.

Brian Luper, along with his staff, - who regularly manage the labs' hardware - installed 24-inch iMac computers and set them up to dual-boot, so they are able to run both Windows and Mac OSX. Special care was given to tweaking settings and installing extra software to ensure the equipment could handle the unique needs of the lab. Brian's staff also completed the networking and wireless access.

Steve Odell and his staff from Video Services, selected and installed TVs, designed the special tabletop controls and mounted an interactive white board. The hours he spent working closely with the lab staff to perfect these key features helped to ensure students would be able to fully take advantage of these features.



Involving Faculty

As part of the design process, the Classroom Renovation Committee, lead by Carla Yanni, was invited to review the plans and offer suggestions. This committee, charged with the redesign of classrooms around Rutgers, includes a diverse group of insightful faculty who understand instructional needs.

Their input proved to be rather valuable with many of their suggestions being incorporated into the ultimate design - including soundproofing the ceiling to dampen noise, and installing versatile lighting. Seeing the completed Alcove, the committee was pleased with the final result. “This facility has great potential for both students and instructors,” said Carla, adding “by reaching out to faculty members, OIT made a good idea even better.”

Alcove as Classroom

As a reservable computer classroom, instructors will find that the Alcove is a unique environment for coursework involving group projects. It is ideal for classes in which small groups of students collaboratively work together using computer technology and then later may be expected to present their work to the larger class. The facility can comfortably accommodate a class of 18 to 25 students. To create projects and presentations, teams of classmates, consisting of three to six individuals can use the iMacs and various multi-media software. Alternatively, they can just as easily utilize their own laptops which they may bring to class. With each table able to project to a nearby wall-mounted LCD display, material can be jointly viewed and crafted on a big screen. Instructors can walk around interacting with the individual teams, or facilitate class discussions as each group later presents their work to the whole class.

Open To Anyone

While the Alcove was designed to adequately handle such classes, a focus was also put on making it desirable on a walk-in basis at other times. Groups of students can just show up, pick a comfortable location and work together on a project. This is one of the few locations in an OIT lab especially designed with groupwork in mind. Given the diverse courses around Rutgers that assign such projects to students, the Alcove addresses a pressing need. And how about when team projects are not being worked on? The Alcove also makes a great wireless lounge, available to anyone with a laptop who just wants a comfortable place to hang out in. Those with a laptop get the added advantage of being able to print to the nearby bank of printers in the main lab.

Interactive Meetings

The Alcove also has a private meeting room - which fits eight people comfortably - that is equipped with an interactive computerized whiteboard.

Having created a variety of well-designed classrooms at the Plangere Writing Center, Paul Hammond enthusiastically offered OIT staff a tour, and demonstrated the Smart Board that had recently been installed there.

This technology allows an individual to directly manipulate, and even annotate, a large wall-mounted computer display. This is ideal for collaborative projects. The board, being quite full featured, can be used in many interactive ways.

Realizing that a Smart Board would be the perfect focal point for the Alcove meeting room, Melissa and Cody researched the product carefully to ensure the right choice - a 77 inch model - was selected for the space. To drive the board, Brian Luper recommended that a Mac mini be mounted under the conference table - a versatile but unobtrusive touch.

Given the balance between easy-to-use advanced technology and a setting that is quiet, comfortable and private, this is a great location for holding a productive, yet enjoyable meeting.

What's In a Name

Frank Reda, the Director of New Brunswick Computing Services, coined the name: The Alcove. As he explains, "As a computing organization, we were certainly focused on ensuring the technology in the new learning space was cutting edge and appropriate for the user's needs. But we also set out to make the space especially inviting, a place students would enjoy spending time in. The name Alcove emphasizes the comfortable, even home-like aspects of this new lab."

TheALCOVE

Students Are Pleased

Is this collaborative space living up to its name? First reaction to the Alcove has been extremely positive. Recently, a student rushed in to get a good seat and immediately set to work on a project. When asked if she had used the room previously, her response was, "Absolutely. I love this place. This is the best thing to happen at Rutgers in a long time." Or consider what a group of students who regularly use the meeting room and its Smart Board urged, "Don't tell anyone else about this place. We want it all to ourselves."

Fork in the Road

By opening the Alcove, the Office of Information Technology has begun to travel down a new road, one where students can access computers in comfort and collaborate together on projects. It is also a road where faculty has access to a variety of tools which enable them to teach in new and exciting ways. Easing down this path became possible by working closely with many members of the Rutgers community - students, faculty and technical experts alike - to determine people's needs and find creative and desirable solutions. Assuming the community continues to support the travels down this road, OIT is likely to continue to transform other labs as opportunities to do so present themselves.

Don Smith, the Vice President of Information Technology, sums it by stating: "It is important that OIT continues to understand the computing needs of the Rutgers community while simultaneously keeping in tune with the latest technological trends. Knowledge of both will ensure we offer the right solutions to important problems."

More Information

For reservations, photos and further information about the Alcove visit: http://alcove.rutgers.edu
To submit comments and suggestions email feedback@computerlabs.rutgers.edu