

Micro Center Use Patterns 1984-1985

During the 1984-85 academic year the staff of the Micro Center served over 36,000 patrons. Walk-in use increased from less than 1500 in the center's first month of operation to nearly 5000 patrons in May of 1985. Software circulation activity exceeded 39,400 transactions. Machines were used for a total of 86,998 hours. Over 4,000 members of the Cornell community attended 223 workshops and seminars in the center's computer classroom. In other words, the level of activity was extremely high for this period of time.

During the past year the center's popularity grew continuously among its clientele who represent most departments in the Colleges of Agriculture and Human Ecology. In just one year of operation a marked increase in the sophistication of using microcomputers has become apparent throughout the campus. User sophistication can be measured most clearly by a vocabulary reflecting an ever increasing understanding of the operations of a microcomputer. This vocabulary is used throughout the colleges to discuss applications of a tool that was either unknown or unexploited by a majority of campus population only fifteen months ago.

From the early weeks of the fall semester, members of the CAI5 community began to apply microcomputers to their academic projects. The most noticeable application of the microcomputer has been word processing. Students and faculty members recognize the advantage of organizing information with a micro and then using that tool to draft and revise a document. Once a patron becomes proficient with one type of application such as word processing, he begins to explore related methods and other applications. Interest in various applications including spread sheet analysis, database management, and several programming languages continues to increase. Applications for the center's two Macintosh computers were very popular among patrons during the past year.

Perhaps the most exciting application of the microcomputer involves using it as a tool to access bibliographic information contained in large, remote databases. Over 819 patrons participated in workshops offered in the areas of information retrieval and reprint file management. Circulation of software related to these activities also indicates that there is an ever-growing interest in exploiting the microcomputer's information retrieval and management capabilities.

The computer classroom was used heavily throughout the year. While some students sat at a computer for the very first time, others worked through relatively sophisticated applications, such as a spread sheet analysis of a green house business for a floriculture course. Students tested software, developed by a professor in Human Ecology, from which they learned to read rapidly and comprehensively. Other students were trained to write their own computer programs. Scheduling of the classroom caused relatively few problems. However, heavy usage of the classroom generated complaints from walk-in users interested in gaining access to one of the twenty-one instructional work stations.

The center has been used to near capacity throughout the year. The weeks preceding breaks and exams were clearly the weeks with the highest intensity of use. In order to gain access to a work station, students have begun to break the long standing habit of sleeping until or through their earliest classes. Quite frequently students are bumped off their machine as soon as their hour time limit runs out. Stations are no longer left vacant for large portions of the day. The possibility of extending the center's hours is one which the administration will have to consider in the near future.

The Software Collection

The library's collection of software grew dramatically over the course of the past year; thirty-five titles were added to the shelf list and eighty packages were added to the collection. Among the packages added were generic spreadsheet, word processing, and database packages. Packages for information retrieval and reprint file management, and statistical manipulation were also added, along with software for the development of expert systems. In addition to those items placed in the library's permanent collection, several packages have been placed on reserve. Five titles and 35 reserve packages were made available to students in Food Science, Plant Pathology, and Ag Economics courses. The number of reserve packages is expected to increase as faculty become sufficiently familiar with microcomputers to develop course specific software.

Software selections are made by the Computerized Data Services Librarian, The Computer Projects Coordinator, and the Micro Center Manager. Software requests from faculty, students, and other interested parties are considered and filled when feasible. All software is cataloged as a part of the library's collection before it is placed on the shelf. In addition to their bulkiness, most commercial software packages are not designed for heavy circulation. Therefore, it is necessary to have materials bound in small durable bindings. Some of the packages received this year contain disks which are difficult to replace. These materials must be repackaged to facilitate rapid inspection when the package is returned to the circulation counter.

The process of ordering software does not involve the Acquisitions division of the Library at this time. Many software packages require prepayment while others require special licensing arrangements. After conditions for acquiring a software package have been determined by the selection committee described above, request forms are sent to the Business Office and processed appropriately. Over the past year, software vendors have continued to relax the terms of their licensing agreements to in order to address the concerns of multi-user facilities such as the Mann Microcomputer center and to make concessions to educational institutions. As long as the procedures for ordering software are so irregular, software requests will be routed through the office rather than through Acquisitions. Hopefully, these issues will be resolved in the near future.

Each package the Library receives requires several hours of staff time to configure the software for use in the Micro Center. Several members of the center's student staff have become quite proficient at this task. The procedure usually involves making back-up and working copies of all disks received, making the main program disk self-loading, placing files on the disk which describe conditions for using software in the Mann facility, and configuring the software to communicate with the appropriate printer. In the past several months, increasing numbers of software vendors use copy protection schemes which complicate the process of configuring software and making back-up and working copies, as well as increasing the risks involved in loaning the package in a public facility.

Student Staff

It is impossible to overstate the value of the Micro Center's student staff. Student worked a combined total of 5283 hours during the 1984-85 year. In the fall the center was understaffed with only 14 employees working approximately 115 hours per week. If the center were staffed adequately in the fall, the total of student hours for the year would equal 6010. During the Spring semester, the

center employed 18 students who worked a combined average of 150 hours per week. By appointing 5 additional students for the Spring semester, the full-time staff eliminated situations of no student coverage, made it relatively easy for students to find substitutes, made it possible for a few students to work on significant projects, and expanded the of staff's ability to specialize in varying areas of expertise.

The center has managed to maintain a staff of impressively talented and highly motivated student employees who represent a broad spectrum of academic and personal interests. In addition to performing all of the duties associated with the day to day operations of the center, some of the students have undertaken special projects for the Micro Center and in other areas of the library's operations. Most of the student staff have demonstrated expertise in some area of the center's operation.

Several students deserve applause for special projects which they undertook during the past year. Chris Roberts rewrote and unproved the program which monitors activity in the Micro Center. Sufen Chiu updated the entire software collection and added files, informing patrons of conditions under which the library circulates software, to all program disks. Chris Gardner generated a LOTUS system for maintaining the center's monthly statistics. He also worked on a LOTUS project for the administrative staff which processes leave records for library staff members. Sean Kae investigated the use of KERMIT software for on-line communication and terminal emulation. He also wrote instructions for using KERMIT. Likewise Darlene Ritchie spent many unassigned hours resolving and documenting solutions to hardware and software problems. Ames Brown organized the library's collection of Macintosh software. Mchamed Mobarak installed various hardware devices and performed a considerable amount of in-house hardware maintenance.

Sufen Chiu, Ofer Rind, and Darlene Ritchie served as coaches for the BRS instructional program. As a result of their participation, many members of the Comell community were given exposure to this service. All members of the center's spring staff attended an initial workshop in BRS training. During the coming academic year, additional coaches will be appointed and all members of the center's staff should expect to encounter situations involving the online searching program.

Susie Kim is currently working on revision to a Guide to Operations of the Micro Center which will serve as a valuable reference to new operators who are not familiar with the center's everyday operations and experienced operators who may be confronted with a less common situation for the first time. Arash Baratloo has configured many of the software packages received this summer. Ellen Marsden is working through the many problems of Mini-Tab software and documenting her findings in anticipation of a high level of demand for the package in the fall. As the pool of knowledge surrounding the software collection grows new findings are added to collection of reference files. This file increases a student operator's ability to assist patrons with any package from the collection even if the operator is not familiar with the package in question. The staff will continue to use an electronic bulletin board to remain apprised of information affecting the center's operation.

Most of the student operators were pleased with the student evaluation proceedings. Many of them expressed an appreciation of the guidance they received from the center's full-time staff and a high level of satisfaction with their student employment experience. Fortunately, the center's student selection process has worked very well and the attrition rate among its student employees

is extremely low. The full-time staff of the Information and Technology Section appreciates the resources of its student staff and is grateful for all of the dedicated effort put forth by this group of individuals.