

# Illinois college networks its AV

CTI HELPS HEARTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORT

**The challenge.** AV and IT managers know that problems with installed AV systems are most often caused by user error. "It's a big concern," says Matt Childs of the Peoria, Illinois office of Conference Technology, Inc. "At least 85% of the issues we see are due to users not understanding how to make their systems work."

It's not that there's something wrong with AV users or their training. It's just that AV systems are getting more and more complicated as their capabilities grow.

**The solution.** A control system can greatly simplify operation of any AV system. "Not just any control system will do," says Childs. "You need something that's designed carefully, that makes intuitive sense to users and is very uniform as someone moves from one room to another across a college or office campus." In a multi-room situation, the best systems are networked, so that support people can take over a room's operation, diagnose the problem and solve it instantly.

## Networked controls

This was the situation at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois. By the start of the 2006/2007 school year, they had 56 classrooms and six conference rooms with installed AV systems, yet they had no automated method of control. The rooms had only very basic push button panels, and the faculty kept three full-time technicians and a number of part-time helpers busy with questions and problems. It didn't help that the school has two satellite campuses in Pontiac and Lincoln, Illinois.

So when administrators began planning for the addition of 34 more AV systems in a new building, they went to AMX and then Conference Technologies for help simplifying equipment operation. CTI installed the new systems over the summer, adding AMX Modero touchpanels to all existing classrooms, standardizing the interface so that all panels looked the same. The networked system brought each classroom onto the school's internal network, so that technicians at the IT help desk (and elsewhere) can monitor, diagnose and remotely solve nearly any problem.

## Uniform capabilities

Heartland had already standardized the equipment in each room: a projector and screen, computer, laptop interface, document camera, combination DVD player/VCR, video scaler, amplifier and speakers. Four new conference rooms use a 50" plasma instead of a projector, and in one of these, CTI will soon install a videoconferencing system. A digital media lab includes the standard gear plus 7.1 surround sound and digital video and audio inputs, including a Macintosh media production system. A special classroom is all-wireless, with all video, audio and control connections made via WiFi routers.

"The real challenge in a project like this is the programming," Childs explains. "We were able to bring in a specialist from our Memphis office to add some really nice touches." The layout of the screens actually anticipates the controls a user will need. "It almost thinks for them," says Childs. "An instructor comes in and hits the DVD button. She then has everything she needs at her fingertips: play, forward, reverse, volume and lighting controls."



*One of the 34 new classrooms at Heartland. At right: what's inside each of the podiums.*



Crucial to the design effort was an emphasis on uniformity. "An instructor can teach in literally any room on any of the three campuses," he says, "and find the control panels exactly the same and the equipment in almost exactly the same place in the lectern." The media lab and videoconferencing room have additional equipment and features, but an instructor needing just the basic pieces will find their layout and operation very familiar.

Networking the systems adds another layer of benefits for the college. Among the new capabilities:

- The system allows Heartland media staff to monitor and take over control of any room's AV system from any PC that has AMX Meeting Manager installed.
- CTI service technicians can also monitor and tweak the system without the need to make an onsite service call.
- The system alerts Heartland staff when to do maintenance, such as lamp and air filter replacements on projectors, to minimize downtime and repairs.
- A scheduling component in the software makes sure projectors are turned off when the rooms are not in use. "How many times," asks Childs, "has the last person to use a room on Friday left everything on, which nobody notices until Monday morning?"
- The college is in the process of switching to an Outlook-based system that will query the control system when managers need to schedule a meeting or class. "They will soon be able to type in the capabilities they need and the times, get a list of the rooms that will work, then reserve the one they choose."
- Though theft has not been an issue on campus, an anti-theft component can immediately notify Heartland security should a projector or plasma display be disconnected from the network.
- CTI has set up usage logs to allow the college to track how frequently components are used. "For example," Childs says, "there's a real question on whether it's still worthwhile to include a VCR in each classroom and, with the way they've set up the classroom desktops, whether the laptop interface is going to see a lot of use." When they plan their next expansion, Heartland administrators will have solid data on their equipment needs.

With all 96 rooms now operational, Heartland technical staff have seen a greater than 50% increase in their potential workload. So far, however, they have not had to add any staff. "In fact," says Childs, "they tell me their service levels are higher than ever." Instructors have far fewer problems and when they do, they're solved faster, with far less disruption to their classes. The addition of the new building –something that could have made the support job very difficult– was handled smoothly.

"The college has done a great job of providing instructors with everything they could want or need," says Childs. "It's a great situation."



*Above: the new media lab at Heartland.  
Below: videoconferencing room nearly complete*



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