

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB INAUGURATES CENTER TO STUDY INTERNET

We become more aware each day of all that information technology can do for us.

What we don't know yet is what information technology is doing to us.

How does this bold new technology affect us as individuals, as citizens, as families and as societies.

A new research center has been formed at the University of California, Santa Barbara -- one of the founding institutions of the Internet some 30 years ago -- to study precisely those issues.

"In the coming decades, the use of information technology and new communication capacity will dramatically alter commerce, culture, identity, social structures, politics and the relationships between nations," said Bruce Bimber, UCSB political science professor and director of the new Center for Information Technology and Society.

"The pace of these changes will likely outstrip those of any historical period, including the Industrial Revolution," Bimber said.

"This new revolution in communications calls for research and dissemination of new knowledge of all kinds."

As constructed, the Center will divide its studies into several areas: It is building wired classroom environments, to study information technology in the learning

process.

It is studying communication in distributed organizations, and also how information technology affects civic interaction and the structure of society.

Finally, it is studying how information technology affects values and culture.

To undertake such diverse research, the Center has enlisted the services of faculty from myriad scholarly disciplines.

The Center is a collaboration among the UCSB College of Engineering and the Divisions of Social Sciences, Humanities and Life Sciences in the College of Letters and Science.

Represented departments include computer science, political science, psychology, electrical and computer engineering, sociology, anthropology, communication and English.

Such a full-spectrum approach to studying information technology issues makes the Center special.

"Many departments at other universities do research regarding the impact of the Internet on their particular field," Bimber said, "Most of those are confined to one or two disciplines.

"Our goal is to succeed by being the broadest and most integrative center." Many of the research projects will be interdisciplinary in nature, with researchers from several disciplines working as a team.

That is a theme that runs throughout UCSB research.

UCSB's tradition of interdisciplinary research fits hand-in-glove with the societal dimensions of new information technology," Bimber said.

"The scope of change that information technology is bringing spans culture, economics, social structure, politics,

the individual and more.

"For scholars in different fields to work in isolation behind the boundaries of traditional disciplines is to risk missing the big picture and to perhaps miss some of

the details as well," Bimber said.

Many of the Center's affiliated faculty are already embarked on research related to the Center's mission.

"That's a good starting point for us," Bimber said.

"In addition, we will be making grants.

The first call for proposals is currently out."

The Center also has plans for conferences, workshops and speakers, fellowships for researchers, and collaborations with corporations."

Formation of the Center is being underwritten by a founding gift by the Dialogic Corporation, an Intel Company.

Dialogic Vice President Charles House is chairman of the Center's Industrial Advisory Committee.

"Very few groups ever studied the probable and possible impact of (computer) technology on our society from a broad-based multi-disciplinary stance," House said.

"Thus, we are having to deal somewhat retroactively with these issues today.

"Here, we have a chance to formulate and study these phenomena ahead of time, or at least as they unfold.

The value of that quest should be inestimable."

Bimber and House will be seeking other corporate partnerships to contribute to the Center's funding and are holding discussions now with people interested in joining the Industrial Advisory Board.

In a fitting but coincidental move, the Center's offices in UCSB's North Hall are directly above the 1969 site of a 900-pound computer that was the campus' contribution to founding the ARPANET, which grew to become the Internet. Further information on the Center for Information Technology and Society can be found at its website, www.cits.ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.