

TECHNOLOGY, EQUIPMENT OUTDATED AT UTAH COLLEGES

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When Paul H. Thompson was inaugurated as Weber State University president two years ago, he was surprised on a get-acquainted campus tour to discover instructional equipment that pre-dated his days as a college student in 1958.

“We talk about delivering a world-class education, but that education implies world-class equipment as well,” the WSU president said. At the two-year Snow College, President Gerald Day talks about the automotive mechanic classes in the vocational-education program when asked to discuss his school's equipment and technology needs.

“If you have a pre-1978 car with a carburetor, we can probably work on it. If it has fuel injection and a computer, forget it. We're training students to be shady-tree mechanics in today's technological world,” he said.

From computer labs and library databases to scientific and vocational equipment, officials at Utah's nine public colleges and universities say they are falling short in many areas when it comes to providing the necessary technology.

In the past four years, the Utah Legislature has pumped \$40 million out of a \$60 million pledge into public education to upgrade technology statewide. Called the Educational Technology Initiative, the program has sought to bring grades K-12 into the computer age.

But, except for \$3.6 million to fund teacher-training programs at the four public universities, higher education has been largely left out of this ETI funding loop.

“We have huge needs in technology,” said Dixie College President Douglas Alder. “ETI has been magnificent for the public high schools and teacher education at the universities. But for the five community colleges without colleges of education, we have been overlooked in the technology area. We have high school students coming to Dixie who are used to better equipment than we have.”

Higher education does receive technology funding, but it often comes in a piecemeal fashion - through student fees, one-time legislative supplemental appropriations, business partnerships and research grants - rather than through a comprehensive package like public education's ETI that is funded by the Legislature.

“We've tried to chip away at the needs with one-time money and supplemental appropriations,” said Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education Cecelia H. Foxley.

Lawmakers, however, have regularly funded the expansion of the EDNET, the microwave educational technology system that serves both higher and public education.

The big computer boost for several institutions came in the mid-1980s when they established student fees to set up student computer labs. At WSU, for example, students paid \$7 per quarter from 1986 to 1989 to purchase hardware and software. That fee has since been dropped.

At the University of Utah, however, a student computer fee is still in force. It's charged on a sliding scale, based on the number of credit hours, but runs a maximum of \$40 per quarter for undergraduate and graduate students, a flat \$40 for medical students and a maximum of \$60 per semester for law students. The fee brings in \$2 million annually for the U.

“The student fee is a godsend. Without it, we'd be in the computer stone age,” said U. President Arthur K. Smith.

But while the fees pay for hardware and software, the U. still struggles to provide enough support staff who can help students in the computer labs.

In fulfilling research and vocational training roles, the colleges and universities also receive equipment donations from businesses, work out arrangements where they can use equipment at nearby businesses and purchase equipment through research grants or at reduced rates.

Utah Valley Community College, for example, worked out a deal with Stouffer's so students could use equipment at its Springville plant. Parker Hannifin Corp. made arrangements with suppliers for WSU to purchase equipment at reduced rates.

But the college presidents pointed out that those arrangements don't work out in every discipline, and they still have to find the money to buy the discounted equipment. "There aren't too many businesses that are going to give us a \$500,000 piece of equipment," WSU's Thompson said.

Foxley, who is higher education's representative on the state's ETI Steering Committee, said originally ETI efforts focused on public education because higher education had made more progress in securing technology.

But that has changed, with higher education slipping behind. "Now it's higher education's turn," she said.

Sen. David Steele, R-West Point, also a steering committee member, said higher education has long positioned itself to gain legislative support for its own ETI.

But lawmakers need to first worry about higher education's enrollment woes, Steele said. "The single biggest factor against higher education getting ETI money is that the universities get grants and research money that allows them to buy some equipment," the lawmaker said.

Agreeing that increasing enrollments pose a formidable problem, Foxley also said technology needs can't be ignored. "What are you admitting the students to if an education is mediocre or substandard?"

She predicted higher education officials will develop their own ETI proposal for the 1994 Legislature as part of the long-term strategic planning urged on the state Board of Regents by Gov. Mike Leavitt.

Leavitt recently made it clear to the regents that he views technology as an integral part of higher education's future. Vicki Varela, Leavitt's press secretary, said the governor would be interested in a higher education ETI proposal.

"But it doesn't mean that because technology is a priority, he will fund every technology proposal pushed across his desk. It will really depend upon the specific proposal and what it aims to accomplish," Varela said.