Hancock going high-tech

For several months now I have been detailing the capital construction progress of our Measure I projects at Allan Hancock College. Measure I is the $180 million general obligation bond passed by the voters in 2006 to improve opportunities for current and future students through major advancements in technology and facilities.

So far, I have provided details about our new Student Services Center, Public Safety Training Complex and Children’s Center Lab addition, along with my most recent update about the Student Services Center and its related construction and parking detours.

What I would like to delve into more deeply today is the excellent progress we are making with the other part of the Measure I initiative: technology.

Keeping up with technology is a slippery slope. No sooner do you buy a computer, but it is outdated and a newer, faster model is waiting in the wings. Multiply that scenario by Allan Hancock College’s many labs, classrooms and offices, and the task of “keeping current,” even just for computers, is daunting.

Add to the fact that before the passage of bond Measure I, the college had no steady stream of funding for technology replacements or advancements, and you can imagine that we had and continue to have a backlog of need.

Measure I has allowed the college to make great leaps in not only spreading current technology college-wide, but also bringing innovative technology to our classrooms.

Before we began any Measure I projects, we identified how the Measure I funding should be spread between facilities and technology. In addition to allotting $1.8 million dollars over 10 years to technology upgrades, we set aside $6.5 million to completely replace the college’s data system, our “mainframe” that maintains all records, including student, employee and business applications. The system we had been operating on was more than 25 years old and was in jeopardy of failing. With Measure I funding, we are in the process of implementing the new student system (called Banner) and converting many decades of data and records over to it.

It has been an all-consuming, two-year task that will continue for some time. We are completing phase 1, which includes a new online registration system, a new 24/7 web portal for students and staff to access information directly and a new student financial aid system.

Although there have been some bumps in the road to this conversion, we registered nearly 7,000 credit and community education students online this summer, and more than 10,000 students this fall.

The new financial aid system allows the college to disperse funds prior to the semester’s start so that recipients can purchase books and other items in preparation for classes. An upgrade of our college financial system took place last year, and a move to put our human resources data within this same system is under way.

On top of these massive efforts, we are also in the midst of completely redesigning our website to make it much more user friendly and content rich, again thanks to the funding support from Measure I.

What I have just described are the technology “bones” of our operation. However, with funding from Measure I, we continue to create great innovations and opportunities in learning.

In addition to hundreds of new computers for labs and offices, we have purchased high powered iMacs and Mac Pro computers for our multimedia design labs in Santa Maria and at the Lompoc Valley Center, along with professional large format printers.

Current Adobe Creative Suite software, high-definition projectors and recorders for video/film classes and new music sound equipment and computers are also giving fine arts students excellent real world experiences.

In the sciences, our nurses train using a lifelike mannequin that operates via high-tech software that can mimic ailments and respond to various treatments. A sound system was recently added that gives the mannequin either a male or female voice.

Science equipment, including mechanical oscillators, photo gate timers and a 4x microscope, were vital purchases for hands-on student lab work.

The Measure I funding has also allowed many of the programs to upgrade to the latest software in accounting, graphics, multimedia, science, languages and more.

Data projectors, document cameras and computers have replaced the old overhead projectors and helped us to recreate “smart” classrooms.

To support the new online systems and our students’ need to connect to the Internet for research, we have made significant improvements in speed, reliability and security to the data network. Wi-Fi connections throughout most of campus and the Lompoc Valley Center, along with a high speed Internet connection between the Santa Maria and Lompoc campuses, have also been added.

Certainly, we will need to develop a plan after Measure I funding ends to maintain and continue to advance our technology. Funding from the state is never guaranteed and simply not enough when it does materialize.

The college is proactive in grant writing and working with our foundation to help fill in the gaps. We will continue to do so.

For now, we are in the technology “sweet spot,” and our students are reaping the benefits.

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