

## **Check out the PDAs in the CISAT Library**

In December 2002 the CISAT Library, in collaboration with CISAT administration, acquired a collection of 30 personal digital assistants (PDAs) for JMU student and faculty use. The model chosen was the Toshiba e740 which runs on the Microsoft Pocket PC operating platform (the other major PDA operating system is the Palm OS.) The PDAs were purchased in order to study their uses and their potential as teaching and learning tools. The acquisition of these PDAs is a tale of collaboration between librarians, faculty, administrators, and computing support personnel.

The idea to purchase a collection of PDAs for student use grew out of Jennifer McCabe's (Health & Human Services Librarian) involvement in CISAT's interdisciplinary Introduction to Healthcare Informatics for Professionals class. Given the ubiquity of PDA use among health care professionals, the choice to put the devices into the hands of students studying information storage and transfer was obvious. The idea was to expose students to an emerging technology related to their field of study, to study and report on the utility of the devices as information management tools, and to integrate their use into the curriculum in the form of student projects.

The devices came equipped with a suite of Microsoft applications, including pocket Word, pocket Excel, Outlook, Windows Media Player, a Power Point viewer, Adobe Acrobat reader, and many more applications. The Toshiba model was chosen based on performance reviews, cost, and integrated wireless capabilities. Upon delivery of the PDAs Jennifer, John McGehee (CISAT Librarian) and other library staff created loan policies so that the devices could be checked out like any other book or video in the Library collection.

The project began in the Spring of 2003 semester with the distribution of one device to each student, faculty member, and librarian involved in the Healthcare informatics class. Students have documented their experience and feelings about using the devices in an online Blackboard discussion forum. Additionally the PDAs have been used in a data gathering and analysis project, as well as being the basis for the final class project. As a result of this experience, a number of research questions have emerged. For example, the faculty teaching the Informatics course wonder what accounts for student efficacy of new technology, and whether or not this technology could improve clinical cognition.

The large number of PDAs purchased meant that there were a number of extras not being used for the Informatics class. Other CISAT faculty asked to use the remaining devices and three additional sets of PDAs were distributed. James Wilson in Geographic Sciences is experimenting with Arc Pad, the PDA interface for ESRI's ArcView GIS software. Communication Sciences & Disorders faculty are investigating potential clinical applications. Finally, the Physician Assistant program is studying PDA uses for record keeping, patient data management, and clinical support.

In the Library we are always asking how we can deliver the best information to the right location most efficiently. We strive to deliver excellent service now, while preparing for the ways in which emerging technologies will enable us to expand our offerings. There are currently many ways to deliver information to the PDA, as well as many ways to use the PDAs as data collection tools. It has been suggested that in the future our libraries and computer labs won't have computers at all, just docking stations where all students will connect their handheld device to send and receive e-mail messages, search

bibliographic databases, and compose assignments. We don't know what technology we will be using ten years from now, but we do know that our students will be using PDAs when they graduate, and they welcome the chance to get acquainted with them now.

Because there has been widespread interest in the use of the library's PDAs, and because we work in an environment rich with intellectual and programmatic talent, the librarians in the CISAT library, John McGehee and Jennifer McCabe, are convening a PDA interest group for all interested faculty. If you are interested in learning more about what has been done, if you have software writing abilities you would like to try out, or if you would like to try a PDA out in your class, please get in touch with Jennifer ([mccabeja@jmu.edu](mailto:mccabeja@jmu.edu)) or John ([mcgehejs@jmu.edu](mailto:mcgehejs@jmu.edu)).

--Jennifer McCabe & John McGehee