

Information Technology in the News

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF FREE COURSEWARE

■ Rice University's Connexions project is an effort to take the idea of free educational materials to a new level. Started in 1999 by Richard G. Baraniuk, professor of electrical and computer engineering at Rice, Connexions is similar to MIT's OpenCourseWare project, which puts course materials from all MIT classes online for free. But Connexions aggregates course materials from professors at any school. Connexions also offers feedback tools that allow users to rate content, similar to rating systems on sites such as Amazon.com. In Connexions, ratings are conducted after publication—rather than before publication, as in traditional peer review—and Baraniuk believes the ratings system can provide an alternative to traditional peer review, a system Baraniuk believes is broken. Baraniuk also sees enormous potential in Connexions to help community colleges, which rely heavily on adjunct professors who often have little time for course development. With relatively limited resources, faculty at community colleges could use Connexions to create courses tailored for their institution and students, rather than following the common practice of having to rely on a single textbook for material. (*Inside Higher Ed*, <<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/07/29/open>>)

COLLEGES LEARN ABOUT IDENTITY THEFT FROM AN IDENTITY THIEF

■ As part of its efforts to increase awareness about student loan fraud, the Department of Education is distributing a DVD to colleges and universities of an interview with a convicted identity thief. As part of his plea agreement, John E. Christensen was interviewed by authorities to create the DVD, in which he describes how, over a period of three and a half

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TESTING THE COMPUTER SMARTS OF TODAY'S STUDENTS

A group of colleges and universities is working with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to create a test that will measure the Internet intelligence of college students. Although today's students are extremely comfortable with technology, many do not have the skills to discern trustworthy information online from the vast amounts of information available through search engines, according to Lorie Roth, assistant vice chancellor of academic programs at California State University, one of the institutions involved in the project. The test is being designed to assess students' abilities to locate information, choose appropriate sources from search results, and properly cite the sources of information they would use for a project. Teresa Egan, project manager for the Information and Communication Technology Literacy Assessment at ETS, said some schools plan to use the exam to test incoming students to identify those who need to fill in gaps in their basic understanding of the Internet, whereas other institutions might use the test to assess whether educational programs about Internet research have been effective. (*SiliconValley.com*, <<http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/12035418.htm>>)

MCAT, GMAT GO ELECTRONIC

Officials with the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) announced that both tests will move to electronic-only format. The electronic version of the MCAT is being offered on a trial basis in selected locations currently and will be available widely in 2007. Since 1997, the GMAT has been offered in both paper-based and computer-based formats, but the paper test will be discontinued in January 2006. The Association of American Medical Colleges said the electronic format of the MCAT will streamline the process, both for those taking the exam and for those grading it. The check-in process will be faster and will include security measures to prevent individuals from taking the test in place of someone else. The electronic GMAT is an adaptive test, giving test-takers another, harder question if they answer a question correctly or an easier one if they answer incorrectly. Officials with the entrance exam for law schools have no plans to switch from their paper-based exam. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, <<http://chronicle.com/prm/daily/2005/07/2005071901t.htm>> [subscription required])

years, he used the identities of more than fifty individuals to defraud the government of over \$300,000 in federal student grants and loans. Each year, the Department of Education disburses about \$65 billion in financial aid. In the interview, Christensen, who is serving his prison sentence in Arizona, explains how he fraudulently obtained personal informa-

tion and used it to register for classes and apply for financial aid. Because financial aid processes take place largely online, defrauding the government is "becoming easier and easier all the time," said Christensen. "You never have to see anybody" (*New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/30/national/30fraud.html>> [registration required])

tech watch

YAHOO AND UC BERKELEY ANNOUNCE JOINT LAB

■ Yahoo and the University of California at Berkeley have announced a joint research lab focused on research into search technology and social and mobile media. The Yahoo Research Labs-Berkeley is expected to open in August and will be led by Marc Davis, UC Berkeley professor of information management and systems. Yahoo is hoping the new lab will aid its efforts to use emerging search technologies to allow users to access and share information from any location that has an Internet connection. (CNET, <http://news.com.com/2110-1032_3-5790013.html>)

VIRGINIA TECH TO STUDY WIRELESS FOR DOD

■ The Department of Defense (DOD) has awarded a \$246,000 grant to Virginia Tech to study ways to integrate wireless networks on a battlefield to ensure that they interoperate properly. The Defense University Research Instrumentation Program seeks to create a communications infrastructure based on networks—both wired and wireless—that can communicate with one another, according to Thomas Hou, an assistant professor of electrical engineering at Virginia Tech and principal investigator on the project. Because wired and wireless networks have been developed separately, many have architectural differences that prevent them from interoperating. The project will also study smart antennas for wireless networks and video communication. The results of the project are expected to be applicable to network communication problems currently affecting emergency workers and first responders. (Federal Computer Week, <<http://www.fcw.com/article89023-05-31-05-Web>>)

PRINCETON DEBUTS UNIVERSITY CHANNEL

■ Princeton University has launched the

University Channel, an online repository of video footage of academic lectures. The service serves as a central location for finding lectures and presentations from colleges and universities that submit materials. Donna M. Liu, executive director of the project, noted that although some institutions provide Webcasts of important lectures, lectures are frequently taped purely for archival purposes and cannot be easily located or viewed later. The focus of the channel initially will be lectures on public policy and international affairs, and several institutions have already submitted content for the site. Topics might be expanded in the future. The University Channel is also working with cable companies to broadcast some of the lectures over cable networks. The new channel is similar in concept to a University of Washington project called the Research Channel, which focuses on scientific and medical research. (Chronicle of Higher Education, <<http://chronicle.com/prm/daily/2005/07/2005072801t.htm>> [subscription required])

RATING OPEN SOURCE APPLICATIONS

■ A new initiative will provide a rating system for open source applications, with the goal of saving corporate IT departments the time and expense of evaluating such tools. Business Readiness Ratings, a project of Carnegie Mellon University, Intel, and SpikeSource, will allow users to rate open source applications on a scale of 1 to 5 in twelve areas, including functionality, quality, and security. Many believe that one of the largest hurdles facing open source technology is the amount of testing that an organization must perform before implementing it. Charlie Brenner, a senior vice president at Fidelity Investments, which uses a range of open source applications, said, "If there had been an initiative like this two years ago, we could have leapfrogged a lot of what we did." Kim Polese, chief executive of Spike-

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TEXAS INSTITUTIONS TO DEVELOP JOINT DIGITAL LIBRARY

Rice University and four university systems in Texas have announced a partnership to create a digital repository of online resources aimed broadly at public users. Dubbed the Texas Digital Library, the repository will pool the efforts of Rice University, the Texas A&M University System, the Texas Tech University System, the University of Houston System, and the University of Texas System. Initially, the repository will offer various resources online, including teaching aids and practical information, but will not include books. Fred Heath, vice provost of the University of Texas Libraries, said that the program was conceived as a resource largely for individuals outside the walls of academia, fulfilling in some measure the charge of higher education to serve the public good. The budget for the project has not yet been finalized. Heath said he hopes the repository will be online by the end of the year but added that the timing will depend on having sufficient content available for users. (Chronicle of Higher Education, <<http://chronicle.com/free/2005/07/2005071301t.htm>> [subscription required])

Source, which tests open source projects, said that companies would prefer to invest in tailoring software to their particular needs rather than simply testing it to see if it works. Anthony I. Wasserman, professor of software engineering at Carnegie Mellon, said the new rating system "will live or die based on community acceptance and participation." (New York Times, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/01/technology/01open.html>> [registration required])

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