

SCSU students train while being trained

Learning Resources Services department collaborates with companies nationwide

By Christine Hierlmaier
TIMES STAFF WRITER

On-the-job experience and almost 100 percent placement after graduation — and no, it's not the military.

St. Cloud State University students are helping to train and retrain the state's workers while pursuing master's degrees and building their resumes in the Learning Resources Services department. For more than a decade, this department has collaborated with private industry on training models. But more recently, the department's high-tech expertise is gaining national recognition.

Professors and Learning Resources project leaders Rich Josephson and Dennis Fields said expansion of the department started about six years ago at Woodcraft Industries. The company needed to build a third plant, and its commitment to build in St. Cloud hinged on efficient new employee training.

What resulted through Learning Resources was a three-year project creating 14 to 15 training programs with laser disc and touch-screen technology that the wood cabinetry manufacturer still uses today. Total project cost, with a state grant and matching company funds, was about \$280,000.

"They're looking at updating the technology now. So it's nice to see the training is still being used," said Josephson, the research specialist on the team.

The project at Woodcraft led to other smaller training projects in the wood component industry. Then the department landed its largest project yet with Alliant Tech Systems of Minneapolis, a defense contractor. The \$400,000, two-year project included time-intensive video documentation of a particular manufacturing line. The company uses the documentation to help employees set up the line for each new contract.

The classified nature of Alliant's product required that the video be proprietary. And the professors and students went through several security checks before working on-site, said Fields, the personnel and programming specialist. "There was no way they would hire an outside company for this."

Today, Learning Resources is entering the third stage of a three-year training project for Komo Machine, a Sauk Rapids manufacturer of precision machining for several industries. The project focuses on training and retraining for precision measuring. Learning Resources has created several computer-based CD-ROM and video programs from 15

to 20 minutes long. Staff and students are beginning the information-gathering process for a final training module for a particular laser machine.

"On each of our projects, we push the envelope of technology," Josephson said.

The process, though time-intensive, is well worth it for the company in the end, said Keith Poissant, a project leader at Komo.

"Early on, everyone expected to have things happening right away," Poissant said. "When they didn't see results, it was frustrating. But once the modules were ready for use, it was like a light went on. 'Oh, this is worth it.'"

Learning Resources looks for companies with a commitment to training and quality. Larger projects use many hours of employee time to help the professors, staff and students learn about the company and decide on the best approach for training.

"Sometimes it isn't technology they need," Josephson said. "Sometimes it's just a person in a classroom setting."

During the early stages, students and staff will debrief employees about training subject matter, create a rough flow chart and a script. The script will circulate between Learning Resources and the company until it is accurate.

Once each training module is developed, it is tested several times, ultimately by a group of employees who offer feedback. That often results in more revisions.

"So you can see how it takes two or three weeks to develop several 18- or 20-minute programs," Fields said. "That's why companies like to do it with a partnership."

Learning Resources helps companies apply for state funding on larger projects to defer some of the cost. The companies participate with the university through the application process. Grants in the past have required that St. Cloud State also benefit academically from the work.

And it has. Fields said the department's graduate students have almost guaranteed job placement at graduation. They also have opportunities to join Learning Resources for short-term employment on ongoing projects.

The university is working on an undergraduate major in information technology to add to Learning Resources' undergraduate minor and master's program.

"When our staffers are hired, we mourn their loss. But we also congratulate ourselves that they are so marketable," Fields added.

Vicki Osendorf is benefiting from her student experience in the business world. She joined Woodcraft Industries as its training specialist two years after working on the company's training project as a graduate student in Learning Resources.

"It is a unique experience. It helps me value the differences I've seen in creating the technology



TIMES PHOTO BY PAUL MIDDLESTAEDT

St. Cloud State University graduate Mark Garmon as he talks with Dennis Fields about his experiences in implementing

and the final result. I feel it's a key ingredient in our new-hire training program. And when companies come in and ask to purchase it, we can refer them to Learning Resources.

Learning Resources has gotten calls from companies in Kentucky, Tennessee and other states about its training work. Fields and Josephson presented the results of their work to local business reviews to support their funding needs at state conferences. They offer experience to graduate students in other departments and refer them for graphic design or computer work.



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And the department is part of local economic-development efforts, presenting its resources to prospective businesses, Fields said.

In their primary jobs as professors, Fields and Josephson agreed the greatest reward is proving that classroom theory is actually used in the real world.

"We get a kick out of taking theory and research and applying it," Fields said. "It's really valuable information to tell the students. And it's even better when other students tell the others it's important."