

ALL DRESSED UP AND NO ONE IS GOING

New computer lab remains quiet

by Joe Gargiulo, guest writer for the SSU Star

Rohnert Park, Calif. (October 5, 2000) JAWS, Dragon, Kurzweil, DecTalk, Megadots and Zoom.

New “star wars” systems from the Department of Defense? Hardly.

Establishing the front lines of assistive technology, these and other specialized computer programs are available to disabled Sonoma State University (SSU) students at the Assistive Technology computer lab (AsTech).

The lab is staffed by a full-time technical consultant and is equipped with essential hardware — 20-inch monitors, a 1,200-dpi laser printer, headphones and microphones. A Juliet Braille printer, specialized scanners and ergonomic devices such as adjustable desks and chairs, footrests and articulating armrests give disabled students equal access to computer technology.

Despite the favorable accommodations, AsTech has seen little use since it was moved to the Schulz Information Center. The lab was located in the IT Service Center in Salazar from its founding in 1998 until this past August.

There are 360 students registered with Disabled Student Services (DSS) this semester, but very few are using AsTech. Inadequate signage in the newly opened Schulz Center, a lack of awareness and the move to a new location seem to be the reasons. DSS says the signs will be in place shortly.

“We’re very proud of AsTech,” said DSS Director Linda Lipps. “We encourage students to use it, and for faculty to become familiar with it. It’s a very positive environment.”

SSU assures people with disabilities equal access to higher education. Working together with DSS, it supports and challenges students to develop self-determination and independence so they may fully participate as students and citizens.

The creation of AsTech is an important part of that endeavor as the world becomes increasingly computer dependent.

The Students with Disabilities and Friends Club (SDF) strongly advocated the new lab. “It’s an awareness problem,” said SDF President Julie Fuller. “Disabled students don’t know what’s available to them. Many of them are using home computers, but they’re missing out on AsTech’s specialized software.”

SDF’s mission is to unite and build community among the

disabled and non-disabled faculty, staff and students; and to create awareness and education about disability so that equal opportunity and access is ensured for everyone at SSU.

AsTech serves students whose disabilities include vision, communication, mobility, learning, psychological and hearing. Its three workstations are capable of voice input and output, Braille output, mind mapping, screen magnification and optical character recognition from printed documents.

“Dragon, JAWS and Kurzweil 3000 are the cornerstones of AsTech,” said Lab Coordinator and Technical Consultant Bob Watrous. “These gateway programs can be interfaced with popular software such as Microsoft Office. They help create an even playing field for disabled students.”

Dragon Naturally Speaking is dictation software that allows students to talk directly into the computer via microphone and have the computer type the words. This and other voice recognition software have user preferences that can be customized to distinguish distinct pronunciations or inflections in speech.

JAWS functions like Dragon but is also capable of reading information back to the user via speakers or headphones.

Hewlett Packard (HP) donated AsTech’s most powerful workstation. It was underwritten by contributions made by SSU alumni working at HP and matching funds from the corporation.

A 1998 alumni of SSU, Watrous helps students become acquainted with the wide array of software, hardware and ergonomic features available at AsTech. He can be reached at 707-664-2309 or bob.watrous@sonoma.edu. His office is in Room 1058B, just down the hall from AsTech.

Watrous is also conducting AsTech familiarization and training for staff and faculty. He welcomes them to contact him for a personal AsTech orientation.

“I like seeing new doors open for people,” said Watrous. “There’s nothing like going home after work knowing that you made someone’s life easier.”

AsTech is located in Schulz 1058C within the 24-hour computer lab (1058A). It is not in the Schulz library. It is currently open Monday through Friday, 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM by appointment. With increased demand, students could have 24-hour access to AsTech.