

Proposed computer service seeks incidental fees

By Scott Maben
Of the Emerald

A proposed computer service for the University would allow students and faculty the opportunity to engage in discussions on philosophy or music, to get information on intramural sports or to sell a used car.

Campus Information Exchange is a conferencing service or "electronic bulletin board" that will become available for use April 17, provided it is financed by the Incidental Fee

Committee, according to CIE organizer Gary Wheaton, a sophomore in Computer and Information Science.

Organizers of CIE hope to take the proposal to the IFC on Thursday with a special request for \$4,700 to operate the service during an experimental phase ending in June.

Students would be able to sit down at a computer, on or off campus, and join a variety of discussions with other students by typing comments on the

keyboard. Through these "conferences," users could exchange ideas, organize meetings, announce activities, ask questions and debate topics of interest.

Initially, conference topics would cover 22 academic areas and 16 University and student programs. Several miscellaneous services would be offered as well, including free classified advertising, an events calendar, humor and food sections, and a general

referral category entitled "Help Me!"

One also could leave a private message in another's computer file or "electronic mailbox," which is accessible by using a personal password.

Membership would be restricted to University students, faculty, staff and alumni.

Conferencing is used globally, especially by universities, Wheaton said. "I don't know why the University of Oregon doesn't currently have open conferencing for students. It's large enough to have it, and it's got the facilities," he said.

The Computing Center on campus has the hardware and software to operate CIE, as it currently handles two specialized conferencing services: "BB" for information exchange on computer topics and "FF" for faculty only.

Wheaton said there are currently hundreds of terminals and computers linked to the Computing Center for BB and FF use, and estimates there may be hundreds more on campus that are not connected.

"There are terminals scattered all over campus that can be used," Wheaton said. "Most of them are only used by faculty and GTFs."

Included in the proposed budget for CIE is the purchase of four new terminals to be placed in the EMU Computer Lounge for free access to the conferencing service. There are 20 Computing Center terminals that can be used for conferencing.

However, a student also could enter the system from a home computer through a phone modem, which represents a source of entertainment as well as information exchange, according to Wheaton, who usually enters BB through a home computer.

CIE also would be accessible from any Oregon State System of Higher Education campus, he

said. Wheaton believes the benefits of computer conferencing are its immediate and widespread exchange of communication and its broad range of subject matter.

"It's very sophisticated, it's easy to use, and it's fun!" Wheaton said.

CIE is being marketed as a practical medium readily available and relatively inexpensive. "If you've got an hour to blow, like between classes, you can go down to the computer lounge and hop on," Wheaton said.

Professors could hold class discussions through CIE, representing still another use, Wheaton added.

He expects debates on abortion, or creationism versus evolution would draw particular interest. "You could have a debate among 500 people, and nobody could talk out of turn," Wheaton said, explaining the program organizes and posts messages in the order that they are sent.

Each conference would be regulated by its creator, whose main task would be to watch for offensive material and answer questions when appropriate.

Conference content is stored for about one month, Wheaton said.

CIE's major obstacle, Wheaton said, is a lack of knowledge about the benefits of the service and what it will take to get it going.

"The problem we're having is all the people who use conferencing say 'Oh, it's a cinch to go, so I don't need to put any of my time in to make it go.' The people who've never used conferencing say 'I have no idea what conferencing is. I feel fine now. There's no reason why I'll benefit from it,'" Wheaton said. "It's like trying to explain the benefits of the telephone shortly after it was invented."

Wheaton said funding for CIE through student fees is crucial. "There's really no other way to do it."

The CIE program, called COM, originated from Sweden and was purchased by the Computing Center earlier for BB and FF. The bulk of the IFC funding, if awarded, will pay maintenance expenses for basing CIE through the Computing Center and will purchase the four new terminals for the computer lounge.

If enough interest is shown, he added, new and improved CIE services will be available next fall.

"We're personally thinking that before the end of this term we should have about 1,000 students accessing CIE, provided we get the funding," Wheaton said.

CIE organizers will present details of the proposed service and answer questions about CIE and BB conferencing at a public meeting in EMU Cedar Room F at 7 p.m. tonight.

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