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Willamette's scholarly workstation

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At the beginning of Fall semester, 1994, the librarians of the Mark O. Hatfield Library at Willamette University introduced a prototype scholarly workstation that provides access to the Hatfield Library's electronic and print information sources.

The "Infostations," as the workstations are dubbed, are high-end 486s that use a Microsoft Windows interface to connect users to the library catalog, over thirty networked databases, and the Internet, through the library's gopher and World Wide Web (WWW) page.

Willamette's Scholarly Workstation

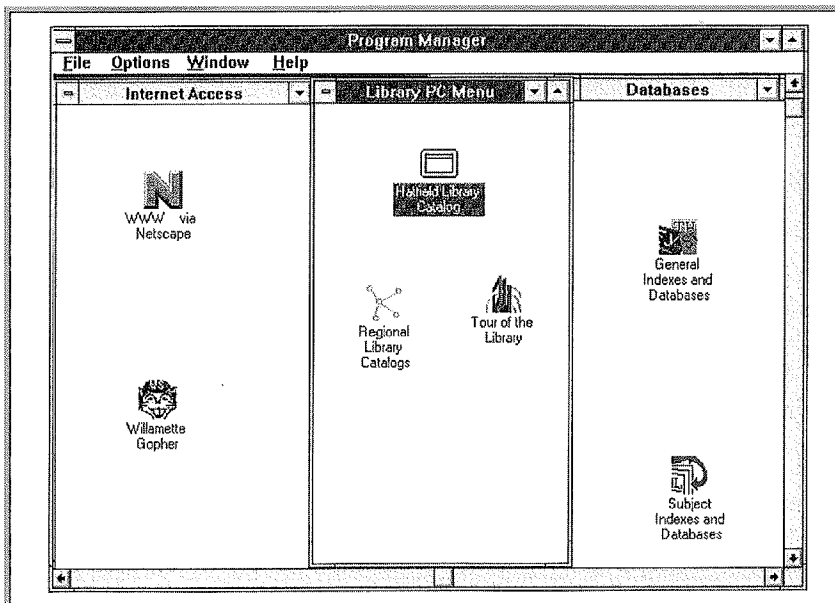
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When users approach one of the Infostations, they see a screen that is divided into three vertical, rectangular compartments, each of which represents a type of resource: the left one contains Internet resources, with separate icons for the library's gopher and web page; the middle panel contains icons representing the library catalog, a hypertext library tour, and a menu of local library catalog connections; and the box on the right contains icons denoting online databases available from either CD-ROMs, tape-

loads, or remote databases reached through the Internet.

By pointing and clicking twice with a mouse, the source represented by the icon is opened, and the user is then either taken directly into a resource, as with the library catalog, or presented with a menu listing the resources available in that area, as with the networked databases.

Initially, eight Infostations were set up. After the first semester, three more Infostations were set up in the reference area, and five other workstations were set up in a mini-computer lab near the audio-visual area on the library's second floor. The five stations in the mini-lab



Users see this screen when they first approach the workstation.

access the same resources that the other 11 Infostations do. In addition, they are able to make a direct link to the campus network. This allows students to access their email in the library without monopolizing the workstations in the reference area for personal usage.

The Infostations have generally met with approval from both staff and users. Users recognize that the ability to connect to the majority of the electronic resources made available from the Hatfield Library from any given workstation is a distinct advantage over moving from computer to computer in order to access different resources. The Windows interface is fairly user friendly, and except for a little practice with the mouse, there does not appear to be much difficulty for most users in adjusting to it. For the most part, initial success with the Infostations seems to rely on the user's experience and comfort with computers and the Windows interface.

If confusion occurs or problems do arise, the reason is usually that there are many resources available at one terminal. Those students or other users familiar with the Wyse terminals (a few of which remain for quick look-ups in the catalogs or for those unwilling or unable to grapple with the Infostations) are sometimes surprised or confused by the possibility of searching the variety of sources available. Students who were used to finding certain CD-ROM databases on stand-alone terminals are not always sure they have made their needs clear when they are referred back to the terminal they just used for a catalog search for another search in the MLA Bibliography. Obviously, a major factor in having a successful switchover to this or any new interface is to publicize it and provide instruction sessions in the use of the new capabilities.

The Infostations have proven to be a promising first step in our efforts to achieve the vision of a universal information workstation. Although there are many positive features about them, there is a continuing need for growth and improvement, both in the resources to which they provide access and in the platforms that enable users to connect to those information resources as effortlessly as possible. Future improvements may include a restructuring of the compartment containing database resources. At present there are only two icons: one for subject-specific sources and one for more general sources. Someone suggested that the resources accessed through these two icons would be more readily accessible if they were divided into subject areas, e.g., sciences, humanities, or social sciences. An even more substantial change could be with the interface used on the Infostations. A World Wide Web page as the initial screen could replace the Windows screen that currently greets users.

With continued improvements, upgrades, and innovations in hardware, software, and data sources, the only sure thing about the future of the Infostations is that they will change. It is the goal of the librarians of the Hatfield Library that the changes made will make the most of the technology available, and that these changes will increase the ease with which information is made available to our users. □