

Lack of software limits computer use in college classroom

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Despite all the hullabaloo about colleges requiring students to buy personal computers, few colleges — possibly as few as 10 out of more than 3,000 in the United States — expect students to own computers. Few universities are regularly using computers in classrooms.

A major barrier to computers in every classroom is the lack of software programs, according to educators and computer manufacturers.

"There is very, very little teaching software on the market today," said Les Comeau, who oversees International Business Machines Corp.'s participation in computer research at universities.

There is a wide gulf between software on the market today and the programs being

dreamed up at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Brown University, Carnegie-Mellon University and other colleges.

At Stanford University, software being written by students and teachers for a variety of courses is among the most advanced available at universities.

"Our work is pushing the limits of the machines currently available to us," said Barbara Jasinski, assistant manager of the university's Faculty Author Development (FAD) program.

These programs open up new academic territory to students.

Scholars of the economics of France during the reign of King Louis XIV usually study all sorts of tables about grain imports and other businesses to examine how the system worked.

But studying seems a lot more fun when "The Would-Be Gentleman" pops up on the computer.

An idea of Michael Carter, director of Stanford's Instruction and Research Information Systems (IRIS) and Carolyn Lougee, associate dean of Humanities and Science, "The Would-Be Gentleman" is a game where students assume the identity of a young Frenchman during the 17th century. The object is to acquire the wealth and status necessary to be considered successful for that period.

"It is difficult in teaching French history to get across how economic decisions were made," said Tom Maliska of the FAD staff as he demonstrated the software on an Apple Macintosh. "Textbooks show a lot of dry tables.

(With the program), students learn to look at the economy in a new way. It gets them inside the head of someone trying to move forward in (17th-century) society."

Another program, "The TheaterGame" by Larry Friedlander, a professor with the Stanford English department, gives every student a chance to direct a play, something time and resources don't permit.

Using a Macintosh computer, students can call up an Elizabethan stage and assemble a wide variety of chairs and other props. As characters appear on the screen, students can easily move them around and have them appear sitting, standing or lying down.

"Simple animation allows the students to block out movements just like a director would

on stage," Charles Kerns of the FAD staff said.

"The program is simple enough so students don't have to spend all their time learning how to use the computer," he said.

"The TheaterGame" is being tested at several elementary and high schools, as well as at Stanford and San Francisco State University.

"The point of the programs was not to end up with exemplary software. . . . That's a bonus," Jasinski said. "We ended up with software that's a lot more than anyone bargained for."

"The goal was to acclimate the faculty to having computers in the classroom so they could turn around and set the direction for the way Stanford should integrate computers on campus."