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CT OUTLOOK 2001

Higher Education Tests High-Tech Business Partnerships

By **ROBERT A. FRAHM**
 The Hartford Courant

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STAMFORD - As GE Capital Corp. looks for new ways to use wireless electronic devices in its business and sales operations, it can tap the expertise of college students such as Conrad Zils.

Zils is one of about 25 University of Connecticut students working with GE Capital officials on real-life business problems involving digital devices, Web sites and other elements of the growing field of electronic commerce.

The teams work in a state-of-the-art, e-business laboratory at UConn's Stamford campus, part of an \$11 million gift by GE Capital's parent, General Electric Co., to the university in November.

Industry and higher education once operated in largely separate spheres, but the shift toward a high-tech economy has created a large demand for skilled workers and forced businesses and colleges to work more closely together. In Connecticut, the GE-UConn partnership is one of several new ties.

"I think it's super. It's a sterling example of what can be done and what is being done," said Harry H. Penner, president and chief executive officer of the pharmaceutical firm Neurogen Corp. and also a member of the state Board of Governors for Higher Education.

Unlike many of the old manufacturing industries, "these new high-tech and biotechnology industries ... need an ever-increasing amount of intellect to nurture them," Penner said.

The number of graduates in fields such as engineering and computer science declined sharply during the 1990s, but colleges and universities in Connecticut are working hard to reverse that trend, says a new state report on the shortage of information technology workers.


"A common feature of regions having a strong base of

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technology-intensive companies is the presence of major research institutions," says the report by the state Office for Workforce Competitiveness.

Nevertheless, the report also says that business leaders believe college students "are not getting sufficient real-world experiences and the well-rounded education necessary for the demands of today's [information technology] workplace."

That is precisely what collaborations such as the GE-UConn partnership are designed to remedy.

"I'm looking forward to this project," Zils, a 26-year-old graduate student from Middletown, says of the GE study of wireless devices. "It lends a lot more validity to the problem-solving, knowing that high-level people here at GE are going to be using our input."

Chris Kalish, a GE research and development manager, will work on the project alongside Zils and other students and professors.

"A lot of these students have been consumers of the Internet market for years. We get a fresh look at things" through their eyes, Kalish said.

GE gets something else, too.

"We get a look at these people and hopefully have an inside track on attracting the best talent into the business," said Denis J. Nayden, chairman and chief executive officer of GE Capital.

Other Connecticut colleges and universities, too, have forged strong links with business. Yale University is a partner, along with the state and the city of New Haven, in Science Park, the home of dozens of biotechnology and computer software businesses. Norwalk Community College has added three certificate programs, an associate's degree and more than a dozen new courses in information technology in the past three years.

The blossoming relationship between business and higher education has the blessing of many, but some educators worry that business might have too much influence on what happens in the classroom.

Especially in joint research projects with business, universities must protect their responsibility to produce unbiased research, says Sheldon Krinsky, a professor at Tufts University in Boston.

Krinsky, a specialist on conflicts of interest and matters of ethics in research, says that partnerships pose several sticky issues:

Who controls the research agenda? Who decides what

results are published? Who gets credit for new discoveries?

"If, before [research] is sent to the independent scientific community, it is reviewed by the commercial sector," Krinsky says, "this is an abridgement of the neutral and independent values of the university."

At UConn, the partnership with GE includes a detailed agreement spelling out the rules governing research, says Professor James R. Marsden, director of the Connecticut Information Technology Institute at the Stamford campus.

"There is nothing we do that prohibits us from other partnerships or that limits our students," he said. "We took exceptional steps to be careful ... [to] protect our faculty and students."

Still, GE's influence in the new e-lab - a place filled with devices such as a security scanner that identifies lab users by reading the irises of their eyes - cannot be missed. Even in interviews for this story, company officials insisted on being present during discussions of specific projects.


Those projects, which are approved by a committee split evenly between faculty and GE officials, expose students "to all sorts of high-tech software we'd never be able to get otherwise. It gives our students a real edge," Marsden said.

Business Professor Paulo Goes is enthusiastic, too.

Instead of theoretical classroom assignments, "here we have real problems, real deadlines, real subjects," he said. As for GE, "they're getting real solutions and real feedback."

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