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EdCenter Creates On-line Computational Science Resource Community

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY — Members of NPACI's Education Center on Computational Science and Engineering (EdCenter) debuted the Computational Science Resource Community (CSRC) at SC2000, the annual high-performance computing and networking conference which was held earlier this month in Dallas, Texas. The CSRC is an interactive community-building too to house on-line learning materials, assignments, reviews, and people with a connection to the field of computational science, and particularly with NPACI and its sister partnership, the National Computational Science Alliance.

"I would like to encourage members of the NPACI community to enter their projects into the system via the Web site," said EdCenter Director Kris Stewart. "We are inviting them to do so because NPACI has a wealth of projects that are potentially invaluable for education purposes."

"CSRC is not just a repository for gathering information," said EdCenter Computer Resource Specialist Mikhail Burstein. "It is a community-building tool. To become a member, one needs only to go to the Web site, click on 'become a member,' and enter a minimal amount of information."

Anyone with Internet access may peruse the contents of the CSRC collection on-line, and CSRC members may also contribute to it. Because the CSRC consortium encourages contact among its users, members are also encouraged to add their skills and interests to their member profiles, to create another indicator for fellow members to find colleagues. The information required consists of one's name; e-mail address; member type (faculty, staff, student, or other); and primary area of interest, which corresponds to the subject categories of the CSRC collection. "When you become a member, you can contribute material, add assignment or comments," Burstein said. "When you do any of these activities, your name appears with the contribution. Other members may share your interests, may want to learn more about your assignment or project, or may have used the same item and want to discuss results."

CSRC categories include a full gamut of educational subject matter. The bulk of the categories are in science and technology—particularly computational science—but it also includes social sciences such as history and art. CSRC can also be used as a teaching tool for undergraduate education. Faculty members can submit assignments to it, and students can retrieve the assignments via the Web site. In addition, one can add comments and give ratings to projects that have been added to the system by members.

The CSRC software incorporates an Oracle database, as well as Java servlets running in an Enhydra multiserver environment. The configuration is based on the Online Community Starter Kit (OCSK) software, developed by the Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) for the California State University. OCSK was first used by the CDL to create the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) in 1997.

MERLOT now has more than 2500 members. Using MERLOT as an example, the CDL donated the OCSK software to help create a community for information exchange, as well as for education about, computational science.

Run by the EdCenter, which is a part of the Education, Outreach, and Training thrust of the Partnerships for Advanced Computational Infrastructure (EOT-PACI), CSRC is the result of a collaboration between the CDL, located at Sonoma State University; and the EdCenter, located at San Diego State University. The EdCenter is comprised of an interactive group of researchers and educators focused on enhancing undergraduate curricula with supercomputing tools and technology. The computational science group at Boston University, also a member of EOT-PACI, will be adding materials from the National Computational Science Alliance.

Other projects in the EdCenter's near future include Version 2 of the Sociology WorkBench, which will be XML-enabled and will conform to the DDI format. —*AV*