Priority registration evokes mixed feelings

By Joshua Cuneo

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Imagine that you’re in your fifth year at Tech and plan to register for your preferred LCC class. You go online only to find—surprise—the class is already full.

Class registration is based on a course credit system, the more credits you accumulate, the earlier you get to register.

So who, then, are these people filling up classes before the graduating seniors?

The answer is a selective group of students with a special status: priority registration. This means they get to register first, regardless of the number of hours accumulated.

“Well, for example, the disabled students, some of them are limited in the buildings in which they can have classes, and if you’re in a wheelchair, you might not have time to get from one location to another,” Debbie Williamson, associate registrar, said.

Priority registration for the disabled is common at most universities, but Tech also tack[s] on athletes, who have to keep their afternoons free for practice and games. Tour guides must be available at the pre-established tour times, and FASET guides—who assist the registrar’s office—get it in lieu of monetary compensation.

And Presidential Scholars? Well, it’s just part of the package deal.

Some students consider this unfair bias in favor of certain extracurricular activities.

“There are so many other ways to get involved, I don’t see why it has to be narrowed down to those listed,” Ajay Patel, a second-year Physics major, said.

Others have a more mixed reaction, understanding the reasoning behind some activities but not others.

 “[FASET leaders and tour guides] help out a lot around campus, and they aren’t exactly getting paid to do it,” Ricky Whelchel, a second-year Material Science and Engineering major, said. “[But] athletes is pushing it. A lot of them get free school in the first place.”

Priority registration can cause a lot of grief for students who try to sign up for popular humanities and elective courses or courses in their major only to find them already full.

“Most people would probably agree that the academic effort they put in should give them priority in registering for their academic schedule,” Steve Heitner, a fifth-year Biology and Biochemistry major, said.

Other students point out that any student can get priority registration if they want it badly enough.

“If people really want priority registration, they can do something to get it, like being a tour guide or helping the office,” Brian Williams, a fourth-year Discrete Math major, said.

If a class fills up early, though, the fault lies with the individual schools.

“The Registrar has absolutely no jurisdiction on how many seats are put out there,” Candy Carson, associate registrar, said. “We see it when we see it.”

Most schools try to solve the problem for some courses by restricting by major, reserving seats or requiring a permit for registration.

So what can students do if they discover a class is full? They should request an overload for the course and keep an eye on OSCAR during Phase II registration.

Nevertheless, the priority registration system is likely to remain unchanged for the time being.
Library adds cafe, theatre, group work stations

By Nikhil Joshi
Focus Editor

In collaboration with OIT, the Tech library has completed plans for its renovations for its First Floor East. These include a Starbucks-style coffeehouse and a theater-like space for presentations.

Charles Crit Stuart, associate director for Public Services, played a key role in the development of the project. Stuart expects renovations to be complete by Jan. 2.

Only six years ago, he said, the library was very different. According to him, the library is really “coming out of its closet.” Major changes were made, including the opening of upper floors past midnight, and, within the past few years, the hiring of a 24-hour staff and the creation of the First Floor West Commons. Working with OIT, the library was able to make these changes.

“It was difficult, since it was the first time we had worked with OIT,” Stuart said. “But we ended up working together well.”

To begin planning what was to be done with the space, a student advisory council was created, with nine undergraduate students and one graduate student.

“These students are committed to the entire process. They are well-coordinated and passionate, making a great team,” Stuart said.

Stuart said that efforts were made to include everyone’s input into the decision of what needed to be done.

“We asked them as well as faculty what they thought we should do with the space. The student advisory board also put together students in six focus groups, and asked them what the space could be used for,” he said.

The newly renovated area, according to Stuart, has three purposes: to “refresh, stimulate, and inspire creativity.” With this in mind, the project leaders decided to make a more casual, flexible space in which students could study together in large groups and change the environment to suit their needs.

“We are trying to provide furniture and spaces that students can change as needed,” Stuart said. “We will have movable furniture and whiteboards on wheels.”

This renovated space will contain a coffeehouse, called the Jazzman’s Cafe, areas where students can work together in groups (a total of 30 sitting work stations and six stand-up stations) and a “movable theatre.” The theatre area will contain a projection device and a number of rolling chairs; this area can be re-arranged to suit the needs of the users. The circulation desk on the first floor will remain where it is. Newspapers, magazines, DVD’s and CD’s will also be made available in this area.

Jazzman’s Cafe will sell salads, sandwiches and coffee drinks. Vending machines will be located in the same place as the cafe. The cafe has a theme similar to that of Starbucks, with comfortable furniture and chairs with laptop surfaces.

A number of other changes are being made as well, which Stuart expects to increase the amount of visitors to the library. In the spirit of promoting undergraduate research, the library is considering holding a competition among students. The Student Success Center will also be holding tutoring sessions in the library, and a writing center is also being proposed.

“Tech is interested in helping students to learn effectively and to become leaders, and the library is pursuing this goal as well,” Stuart said.

Also, student art will be displayed in various places and in different forms. The library is looking for competition winners, he said.

“One goal that we are trying to accomplish is to celebrate our accomplishments at Tech. We needed a more museum-like place in the library—a celebratory spot.”

Much of the library renovation is being done in order to get a feel for how the Undergraduate Learning Center (ULC) might look. The budget for the current project is about $1 million, with about one-fifth of the total coming from an endowment from the class of 1955 and approximately one-tenth from a trust. Additional money for the project will be requested from the technology fee and other sources.

For the long term, the library is looking to renovate both of the buildings and create a “student productivity zone” in the West Commons, Stuart said. The library is working together with OIT and several other major players to create a strategic vision, for which development can begin.

“The idea is that we’re not some stuffy research place,” Stuart said in conclusion. “We’re also a place where students can relax, be comfortable, and learn at the same time.”
Dean Gail shares work experiences, advice

The dean talks about her passion for helping students, gives advice to incoming class

By Nikhil Joshi
Focus Editor

Dean of Students Gail DiSabatino loves the student population at Tech. Known on campus as Dean Gail, she serves as one of the primary advocates for students and student life.

“I love working at Tech. The students here and the interactions that I have with them on a day-to-day basis are my favorite parts of working here,” she said. According to Dean Gail, her most important role is to “be the friend of the student.” Her duties consist of disciplining and advising.

The Office of the Dean of Students works with students to develop new ideas in addition to helping students that find themselves in difficult situations. Dean Gail also plays a major role in student government. At meetings, she handles questions dealing with procedural and legal issues. She also assists many SGA members in their initiatives.

“I provide them with faculty connections and help them to set up plans of action for things like the Six Flags trip last year,” she said.

Within the Office of the Dean of Students, there are several units that deal with specific issues relating to student life. These include ADAPTS (Access Disabled Assistance Program for Students), SMART (Students Managing Alcohol Risky Traps), Leadershape, Diversity Issues, Student Publications and Media, Student Involvement, the Women’s Resource Center, and the office of Community Service, Greek Affairs and Student Integrity.

“Our office covers a broad spectrum of issues that students may have. It is our duty to coach them on how to deal with a conflict,” Dean Gail said.

She added that the office also talks to faculty about students, and to students about faculty, although direct interactions between student and faculty are encouraged.

As she sees students on a day-to-day basis, Dean Gail has dealt with many of the typical problems that students have, especially freshmen. The hardest part, she said, is getting students to understand that college is an entirely different ball game than high school.

The greatest challenge in my work is that many students that come to Tech are very achievement-oriented,” she said. “They have been very successful in the past and are used to doing well. And when they find themselves doing poorly, it is hard for them to admit that and get help early on.”

“So people come to me very late,” she added. “They’ve been letting things go on for so long that it’s hard to dig them out of that hole.” It can also seem hard, according to Dean Gail, to get involved. Her advice? Take advantage of available resources.

“I recommend looking at Cyberbuzz, going to the Office of Student Involvement, and trying out different things,” she said. “Go to rush, even if you think you might not join a fraternity. Go to a WREK Radio training session, or another student organization’s meeting. The important thing is to keep an open mind.”

Gail DiSabatino
Dean of Students

Interactive video game draws both praise, criticism

By Alexandra Pajak
Contributing Writer

Professor Michael Mateas and programmer Andrew Stern recently created Façade, an interactive, fully-realized one-act drama available for free download. The fifteen-minute game stands apart from other games in its applications of artificial intelligence (AI), simple graphics and a focus on character interaction. Stern and Mateas created the game after five years of development.

A player maintains his or her own gender and name as one ventures into the game. The game opens with the player entering the home of the affluent and 30-something friends Grace and Trip. Based on the actions and words of the player, marital strains escalate into heated arguments. Multiple game attempts by the same character indicate how the romantic fortunes of Grace and Trip are affected by the choices of the player.

Facade incorporates artificial intelligence technologies and realistic three-dimensional characteristics. Facade differs from other games in its use of natural language and continuous behavior from the main characters regardless of the player’s previous conversation or commands. The control of spoken words and emotional expression through facial changes in characters is determined by artificial intelligence.

Co-creator Mateas spoke on the groundbreaking nature of the game in a recent press release.

“By treating artificial intelligence as an artistic medium, and creating story content procedurally instead of using canned cut-scenes, Façade truly breaks away from today’s games,” he said. “Procedural content will be a key technology in the next generation of interactive entertainment.”

Mateas is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science and Literature, Communication, and Culture at Tech. He is also a co-founder of Procedural Arts.

In the same press release, Stern, himself a seasoned creator of virtual realities with PF Magic, spoke to the uniqueness and strength of Façade as a springboard into the future of gaming.

“We believe Façade can serve as a prototype for interactive drama, a new genre of character and story-intensive interactive entertainment,” he said. “Innovation like this will only come from small independent studios willing to take design and technology risks, not from large conservative game companies.”

Several Tech students have taken an interest in the game, although it is quite different from the games which have been traditionally popular on campus, such as Halo and StarCraft.

“Although it won’t be a major hit, these students claim, it is worth taking the time out of their lives to check out.”

“It’s really interesting, and unlike any game that I’ve ever played,” Spencer Nettleton, second-year Industrial Engineering major, said. “It’s not the type of game your average Tech student would like to play, but its nice to see people taking an interest in a game that isn’t all about violence.”

“I think it’s very different,” Kaushibh Bhardwaj, a second-year Electrical Engineering major, said. “I do think it’s worth downloading, though.”

Procedural Arts’ Façade features artificial intelligence, simple graphics and a focus on character interaction. The characters get into arguments based on the actions and words that the player enters.

Other students find the game complex at Tech, complaining that it does not match the level of excitement that other games such as Halo often create. The simple graphics are an issue: “I have been students are not attracted to the game; there are no stunning visual or auditory effects.

See Façade, page 7
Gail from page 5

Remembering back to a few years ago when she went back to school, Dean Gail sympathized with the freshmen as they enter a new environment. “Freshmen might feel a little scared or intimidated, because of all the intelligent people at Tech. I remember back a few years ago when I went back to school. It was a big Ivy League school, and it was kind of scary,” she said, “but the thing to remember is that if we didn’t believe you’d succeed, we wouldn’t have asked you to come. We think everyone here can succeed, and we want them to.”

“We think everyone here can succeed, and we want them to.”

Gail DiSabatino 
Dean of Students

Façade from page 5

“It’s nothing special,” Artem Akinov, a third-year Architecture major, said. “I didn’t encounter anything that would make me want to play it again. I don’t think most students would go for it; it’s just not that interesting.”

Facade was presented at the first Artificial Intelligence and Interactive Digital Entertainment conference in 2005.

The game has received additional acclaim from experts. Renowned gaming expert Chris Crawford wrote in his book Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling (New Riders Games, 2004), “Facade is without a doubt, the best actual working interactive storyworld yet created.”

Facade has been viewed on exhibition in Scandinavia at the Inter Society for the Electronic Arts (ISEA) and was selected as a finalist in the Independent Games Festival in San Jose, California in 2004.

Gamer Steve Gaynor reviewed Facade in gaming magazine Idle Thumbs.

According to Gaynor, the game’s shortfalls include its unpredictable “shuffle” of ultimately predictable events once the player has played the game multiple times.

Gaynor also commented on the simple graphics and the need for fast typing to keep up with Grace and Trip’s dialogue and actions. He said that this can push away many potential gamers.

However, Gaynor praised the voiceover acting as “top-notch,” as performed by Andy Bayiates (Trip) and Chloe Johnston (Grace). He followed these criticisms with additional praise for the game.

“When all’s said and done, one must recognize that Facade is the personal project of a very small team and, despite its current limited nature, it is extremely impressive as a harbinger of things to come,” he said.

Technical requirements for the game include Windows XP/2000/ME. Computers must have 1.06GB of hard disk space, and at least 1.6GHz and a minimum of 256MB of RAM.

Procedural Arts is in the process of forming a Macintosh version of Facade. More information about Procedural Arts, the company founded by Mateas and Stern, may be found at www.proceduralarts.com.

A playable version of Facade may be downloaded at the website InteractiveStory.net.