

Students are the Real Stars in the STARS Alliance

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About the STARS Alliance

Landmark College is a member of the STARS Alliance, a group of colleges, universities, and organizations, dedicated to improving interest in computing and technology for students who are under-represented in those fields. The Alliance currently includes over a dozen organizations, including large universities such as the University of North Carolina (Charlotte), Georgia Institute of Technology, and Auburn University. Each institution in the Alliance is dedicated to developing approaches and activities that can increase the number of students who pursue computing and technology careers and disciplines.

The Heart of the Alliance

The STARS acronym stands for STUDENTS AND TECHNOLOGY IN ACADEMIA, RESEARCH AND SERVICE. Students at each institution participate in Alliance activities through the Student Leadership Corps (SLC). Students in the SLC participate in regular workshops and group activities to learn more about computing and technology. Each summer, students attend the annual SLC Celebration, a conference with students from each SLC in the Alliance. Last year's conference was held in Atlanta, Georgia and the next conference will be in Charlotte, North Carolina. The annual celebration provides students the opportunity to share what they have learned and accomplished through their site's SLC, and to network with students from other colleges and universities.

Alliance Activities at Landmark

During the Fall 2006 semester, seven students participated in the SLC, including Jason Ackerman, Sondra Boudreau (see cover article), Nick Braley, Erin Cooke, Stephen Gagnon, Michael Murray, and Kristian Terison. Many of these students returned to participate in the Spring 2007 semester, along with new SLC members Ramona Cordasco and Bob Palmieri. Students participated in several workshops about computing, including a presentation on INFORMATION ASSURANCE by Danielle Zeedick (Norwich University), a workshop on TELECOMMUTING from Christine Gray (Hewlett-Packard), and DATABASE BASICS from Julie Strothman (LCIRT). In addition to these workshops, SLC students are working on specific projects to learn more about computing and technology.



Erin Cooke adjusts the optics on the eye tracker to prepare for a study

Learning about Computing through Research

Landmark SLC students are working on a research project to learn more about how people use computers. Last semester, students started working in the Universal Design and Usability Lab in the East Academic Building to learn how to use the new eye tracking system so they could conduct their own research. The group started by brainstorming different research questions they could explore in order to understand how students use information on the computer. For example, they thought that the eye tracking system could reveal whether students can perform tasks better when distracting information (such as flashing banner advertisements and moving "sports tickers") is minimized. After exploring these questions, the group then spent time learning how to use the eye tracking system.

Working with each other to learn how to use the eye tracker, SLC students took turns configuring the equipment, calibrating the eye image, and collecting sample data. The group also took time to learn what eye movement data looked like. By keeping track of their activities, Nick Braley, Erin Cooke, and Stephen Gagnon were able to develop a step-by-step training procedure that other Landmark community members can use. This semester, our SLC students are continuing to use the eye tracking equipment, and are also learning how to use the other software and hardware available in the Universal Design and Usability Lab. Mastering the use of this equipment not only provides students with specialized technical skills, but it also enables them to explore their own research questions through hands-on experience in a state-of-the-art lab environment.

As students continue to learn about the systems and equipment, they will expand on their training procedures, enabling them to mentor others in the use of the lab. They will also practice their lab skills by conducting a study to examine how people's eyes behave when they perform tasks on the computer in the presence of distracting and non-distracting information.

Feedback from Students

As the SLC program moves into the second-half of its first year at Landmark, students are excited about the program and its possibilities. Nick Braley expressed his enthusiasm for the many activities made possible through the program: "The Atlanta conference gave us the opportunity to network with students from other colleges, making connections we wouldn't have otherwise been able to make. The Alliance gives us the opportunity to broaden our education in the computer and technology field, and I'm looking forward to developing my computer skills and my understanding of the computer world and jobs that are related to it." Jason Ackerman shares Nick's enthusiasm: "I really liked the trip to Atlanta – it was fun, and the workshops were great. They focused on computing and other skills (like communications), and I especially enjoyed the robotics lab."

SLC students are excited about the opportunity to learn how to use the eye tracker and other lab equipment to conduct research. Nick Braley would like to use the eye tracker to investigate how students move their eyes when using assistive technologies such as Kurzweil 3000: "I'd like to know if the technology is really helping students read and comprehend better, or is it distracting to students?" New SLC student Bob Palmieri says that he likes the system because "it's so versatile. There's so much you can do with eye-tracking. Understanding how people react to technology, and how they use websites with different kinds of designs, is a field with a lot of opportunities. I'd ultimately like to use the lab to explore how you can make online learning as useful as the in-class learning experience." Jason Ackerman explains his interest in the eye tracking system: "I find eye tracking research really interesting because I don't know what I'm paying attention to. The eye tracker helps me see where my eyes are going, what I'm focusing on, and where I lose interest. The research can show us if the design of software applications and websites helps users successfully interact with them."

A Unique Opportunity for Students

Although the STARS Alliance and the Landmark SLC are still developing, enthusiasm from students, faculty, staff, and parents continues to grow. Due to the unique resources available at Landmark College, as well as the commitment of our faculty and staff members, SLC students at Landmark have access to equipment, workshops, and resources that are unavailable to many students at large colleges and universities. As the STARS Alliance develops over time, we will continue to receive additional funding to support more students in the SLC. For students interested in computing and technology programs at Landmark, this support will help to ensure that our star will continue to shine brighter and brighter!



Bob Palmieri, Stephen Gagnon, Nick Braley, and Ramona Cordasco work together to set up the eye tracker