

Interviewing International Applicants via the Access Grid

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When Professor John Straub, Director of Graduate Studies in the Chemistry Department, asked me to find a way to determine the English proficiency of international applicants, particularly those from China, I looked into videoconference facilities at Boston University to investigate the possibility of conducting real-time remote interviews. Although international applicants must submit TOEFL scores, these do not necessarily reflect their ability to speak and understand English. Since many of them receive Teaching Fellowships, which involve supervising labs and leading discussion sections, it is important that they speak fluently and accurately.

One of the videoconference facilities on campus is in the Department of Manufacturing Engineering, and the Administrator of Distance Learning, Elizabeth Spencer-Dawes, tried to help us locate sites in Beijing and Shanghai that had high-speed IP or ISDN lines to transmit the audio and video signals necessary for the interviews. However, the cost of their use turned out to be greater than the cost of a trip to China. Moreover, it was difficult to locate corporate sites there that would facilitate the process.



Another virtual venue is in the Office of Information Technology, and Jennifer Teig von Hoffman, Project Manager of Scientific Computing and Visualization, was immediately amenable to assisting us with the project. Via the Access Grid (AG), we would be able to connect with a university in China and hold the interviews at their site. I looked on the AG website and found three institutions that had nodes on the network: Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (BUAA), Chinese Academy of Science, and Tsinghua University. Unfortunately, Beijing is the only city connected so far; Shanghai will be connected in 2003, and other provincial capitals in the years to come.



Because of the Chinese New Year and winter vacation, it was difficult to set up the interviews for February before acceptance letters were sent out, but finally BUAA agreed to host the interviews in March. With a coordinated effort by Professors John Straub and Jonathan Lee of the Chemistry Department, the Chinese applicants were contacted by email and informed of the date and time of the interviews. Because of the 13-hour time difference, we had to be in the AG suite by 7:00 AM, which was already 8:00 PM in Beijing.

Although only a few students were able to meet at BUAA on the appointed day and time, we felt it was worth the effort. Seeing their life-size images on the screen and hearing their answers to our questions with

no lag time made the virtual interviews quite realistic. If we had wanted them to explain their research, we could have used a distributed whiteboard application called TeamBoard and seen their diagrams and notes on the screen.

We felt that the interviews were quite successful, and BUAA has requested more collaboration with BU, offering to hold AG seminars at their site for Chinese students applying to American universities. They would like research groups to explain their projects to applicants in the fall so that they can determine if their interests match those of professors, and the Chemistry Department at BU is already planning such an event. In February, after applications are received, we will conduct interviews with candidates to screen for oral/aural English proficiency. The Director of Graduate Studies from the Physics Department, Prof. Sidney Redner, has also expressed an interest in participating in the process next year. In the future, we hope that remote real-time interviews with international students via the Access Grid can be used not only for assessing language skills, but also for promoting graduate programs at Boston University throughout China and beyond, to applicant pools in other regions of the world.



Access Grid Conference Facility at Boston University

<http://scv.bu.edu/accessgrid/>

Access Grid Home Page

<http://www.accessgrid.org>