Project Athena seeks more involvement from students

By Charles R. Jankowski
Second in a series examining Project Athena

Project Athena is striving to get more students involved, according to Jim Fulton '87, the only senior staff member of Project Athena. "The poor major problem that is now being worked on is the issue of student involvement in the system," Fulton said. Only a small number of MIT students who have accounts on the system, he said. "We're just about done building up the staff," he said, referring to Athena staff shortages. "I think things have been going reasonably well with respect to integrating non-staff students into the system, but we still have a long way to go," he said. A common perception among students is "that one of the main things Athena will do is get students on the system," Fulton said. Project Athena will open a cluster of terminals exclusively for students, in the Student Center Library soon. "The System Center will be devoted to giving students a chance to go out on their own, something that hasn't been done at most places," Fulton added.

One of Athena's goals, Fulton explained, is to discover how students interact with computers. Students will be able to use the project freely, limited only by Athena hardware and software. Small problems with Athena are understandable, considering the project's experimental nature, Fulton said. "People are realizing that [Athena] is still an experiment and you cannot predict," he explained.

Students get free systems equipment and software for Athena were donated by the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and the Digital Equipment Corporation.

"MIT is not requiring its students to pay for their computers," Fulton said. "In fact, MIT is paying for it." Fulton said. Many other schools, such as Carnegie-Mellon University and Philadelphia's Drexel University, acquire such deals to purchase personal computers at discount rates.

Fulton proposed two reasons why IBM and DEC, the two largest computer corporations in the world, would donate $30 million of equipment and service to MIT for Athena. First, he said, students leaving MIT and Project Athena will be accustomed to working with IBM and DEC equipment, and will be able to use the same computers after college.

Second, Athena is a valuable source of information for IBM and DEC, and the companies will benefit by knowing how students interact with their computers. The project offers an opportunity to test the software which is presently used in the system, Fulton commented.

Profile

Toomre awarded MacArthur grant

By David B. Oserman

Alan Toomre '57 is an astrophysicist who is recognized for his achievements, in all fields, astronomy. He is a 1949 refugee from Germany. To top that off, his college roommate had a penchant for stinkbugs. His colorful career led to the coveted MacArthur award last month. For his achievements in astronomy, he will receive the MacArthur Foundation's tax-free $50,000 award over a period of five years.

Toomre, who was born in Estonia, escaped to the United States at the age of 18. According to his official policy, "Dartmouth College neither encourages nor discourages the use of alcoholic beverages, but it does condone the abuse of alcoholic beverages. The College commits itself to educating its constituents regarding alcohol."