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Siscast.com upgrades, offers new scheduling features

Teacher, class ratings among new tools

By SONIA PARECADAN / Aggie News Writer

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Matt Jojola/Aggie photo illustration

UC Davis students who toil over the complexity of planning class schedules, or who just want to save time and effort, can turn to a new and improved Siscast.com, a website designed to make this process easier.

The website, which was launched in 2003, has been updated to include a number of new features, as well as improvements to old ones.

The most notable feature on the site is the schedule composer, which enables students to enter their desired courses and view different combinations of schedules. Students can then choose their ideal schedule based on break durations in between courses and starting and ending times.

Siscast developers enhanced the schedule composer in a number of ways. For students with special schedule requirements, Siscast allows users to place restrictions on their schedules to block out certain times or days. It also gives students the option to search for courses exclusively through the open courses list.

“Our goal is to make life easier and better for students,” said Arjan Dehar, UC Davis alumnus and co-founder of Siscast. “We have taken the first step to accomplishing this goal with the redesign of Siscast.”

The website also contains teacher and class ratings, similar to RateMyProfessors.com, so students can be more selective when choosing courses.

Another new feature enables students to search for general education courses that will fit into an already-generated schedule.

“A lot of these tools came from student suggestions,” Dehar said. “The GE feature was widely requested. That was one thing I really

wish I had when I was in school.”

Siscast also allows students to purchase textbooks online. Through partnerships with online retailers, students can have their books shipped to them. Students can also find the books they need by simply searching for the name of their class or by clicking on the “Buy textbooks” link.

Another new tool is the profile section, which allows students to add friends and acquaintances and see what courses they are enrolled in.

The new schedule-overlay feature enables students to combine their schedule with a friend’s schedule to visualize common free time. Development is currently under way to overlay multiple schedules, which will possibly help teaching assistants determine optimal office hours.

“Our goal with the profile section is not to be like the Facebook or other sites that are mainly for social purposes, but to be more of a useful academic tool,” Dehar said. “For instance, you can search for friends in your classes to create a study group.”

Siscast was put together by three 2005 alumni: Dehar, Sean Regan and Kevin Widjaja. Widjaja graduated with a degree in electrical engineering and is currently studying abroad in China. Dehar, who majored in computer engineering and minored in technology management, works on Siscast full time with Regan, who graduated with a degree in computer science.

The idea for Siscast came to Dehar as a first-year student at summer advising who was bewildered by the scheduling process.

“I felt intimidated,” he said. “Using that schedule booklet they give you, it was hard for me to figure out which section to choose. That’s when I thought, ‘I wonder if I could write a program that could do this for me.’”

Nothing became of his idea until two years later when he met Widjaja, who wanted to learn how to use PHP — Hypertext Preprocessor and Structured Query Language. Dehar told him about the idea he had as a first-year student, and a few months later Widjaja had created the first version of Siscast.

Dehar said he has high aspirations for their website, which has become bigger than he ever expected.

“Now that our first step is complete, our next move will be to expand to other campuses, including UCLA, Ohio State, UCSD and UCB, among others,” he said.

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