

FEATURE ARTICLE

ASA MCU SERVICES

In today's world, Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) is becoming more and more popular. Businesses have made use of IVC infrastructures to save time and to cut down on travel expenses. Many educational institutions and networks are now providing the opportunity for remote and rural school systems to participate in classes which were previously unreachable. While this in itself provides great opportunity, the greatest efficiency comes from having the ability for one lecturer to speak to two or more sites at the same time. The implementation of this scenario is supported and made possible by a video Multipoint Control Unit (MCU).

Standard video conferencing generally provides the ability for one site or classroom to call only one other site or classroom. An MCU is the device, which allows multiple sites to be connected in one call. This is the video conferencing equivalent of a conference call over Plain Old Telephone Service (POTS) lines. As an example, in an educational environment, a Spanish teacher can now teach a Spanish I class to 2 or more geographically remote classrooms at the same time. In Alabama, all of this has been made possible by the ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators & Students Statewide) project.

Alabama Supercomputer Authority (ASA) provides a vast video network infrastructure which supports the technical core of the ACCESS project. In relation to this project, ASA has implemented the network connectivity to each school participating in ACCESS, along with technical support and video bridging services. These services make use of ASA's MCU which is located at the Network Operations Center (NOC) in Huntsville.

ASA'S MCU HAS A CURRENT MAXIMUM OF 60 IP (H.323) VIDEO CALLS
ALONG WITH 3 ISDN (H.320) CALLS AT THE SAME TIME.

Many school systems already make use of ASA's MCU, in order to teach a class to a variable number of sites, which are all within the Alabama Research and Education Network (AREN) where Quality-of-Service (QoS) is implemented in order to provide reliable service. When calls are made outside of AREN and traverse the Internet, there is no way for the quality to be guaranteed because the network infrastructure is out of ASA's control. To circumvent the issues of a video call being sent over the Internet, ISDN calls are placed to the remote locations. When making use of ISDN technology, there is no need for quality control as the video call is on a dedicated telephone line. ISDN calls on the AREN MCU have been used by many Alabama schools in order to participate in "virtual fieldtrips" to the USS Arizona Memorial, the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and many other remote locations.

ASA'S VIDEO AND MCU SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS AND
SCHOOL SYSTEMS THAT PARTICIPATE IN THE ACCESS PROJECT.

If you would like to know more or request use of ASA's MCU, email us at videobridge@asc.edu.