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New Center Offers Research Services For Business

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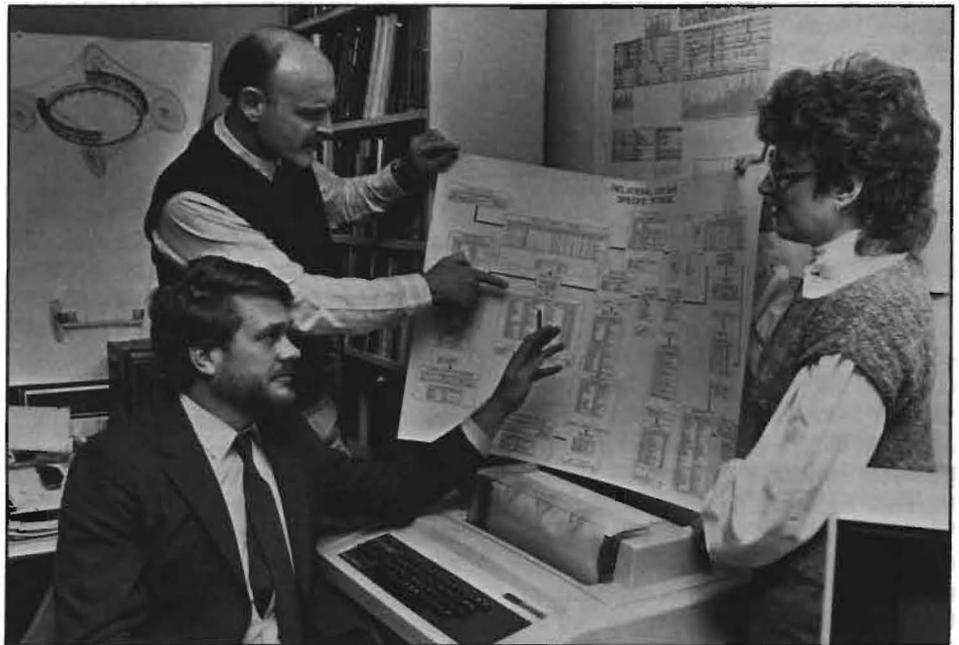
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New Center Offers Research Services For Business

Imagine yourself as a sales representative for an office systems manufacturer. What type of information could you use to help you present your product to a prospective client? You know the advantages of your work station modules over those of your competitor, but you know you would have much more credibility if you could cite scientific proof that shows your products will increase the efficiency of the office worker.

Jim Wise, Director of the Center for Integrated Facilities Research in the Seidman School of Business, can provide that proof. "There's a body of research available on the optimal layout for office work stations," he says. "Access to that research can prove invaluable to a sales representative who wants to present the worth of his or her products to a prospective customer. Our purpose is to put businesses in touch with the knowledge they need in their particular situation. Research has been done in every business area imaginable."

Another example of research applications in a specific area is the plight of a new restaurateur. The proprietor is convinced he has created the ambience that



Jim Wise, left, standing, Director of the Center for Integrated Facilities Research, examines a printout from the new facilities data base with Professor Bill Bavinger, developer of the data base and a staff member of the center, and Research Associate Barbara Wise.

connoisseurs of fine dining demand. The restaurant features a strolling violinist, soft lighting, private alcoves, cascades of greenery, candlelit tables, exquisite china, crystal, and silver service, courteous yet discreet waiters, and a menu that tantalizes the tastebuds.

Yet the restaurant has few regular customers. Those who come seem to enjoy themselves, but they rarely return. The proprietor doesn't want to ask customers to fill out an evaluation as they leave, but it's vital to his future in the business world to discover what he is doing wrong.

"The big thing to remember," Jim says, "is that one person's recreational environment is another's work environment. Sometimes a proprietor who has created an elegant atmosphere for customers overlooks the work environment the restaurant provides for its employees." Often a business problem can be traced to a seemingly insignificant area.

"In the restaurant, for instance, the problem might be slow service. Or perhaps the food is cold when it gets to the customer. In tracing the problem, a researcher may find a poor communication system between the wait staff and the food preparation staff. That particular problem can result from something as simple as acoustics or as complex as personality conflicts. Chances are that if you have a problem, someone else has already solved it."

Jim should know. He and his wife Barbara, who recently joined the Seidman School of Business staff from the University of Washington in Seattle, have done research in so many diversified areas that it's difficult to detail all of them. They have put their behavioral science backgrounds to practical use by conducting research on building safety, crime prevention, and creative problem solving, as well as the de-

continued on page 8

Inside

Message from the Dean	2
Seidman Graduate Is Phi Kappa Phi Fellow	3
IFMA Honors Students	3
Financial Deregulation	4
Marketing Graduate Builds Business Success	5
Accounting Alumni Hall of Fame	5
New Seidman Faculty	7
Seidman Faculty Notes	Insert



New Center Offers Research Services For Business

continued from page 1

sign of such diverse environments as banks, fire stations, restaurants, animal shelters, and NASA space stations.

"People spend 90 percent of their lives living and working in the products of other people's imaginations," Jim says. "It's important to analyze those environments and design them knowing something about how environments affect those who live and work in them. That's what facilities management is all about."

The Center for Integrated Facilities Research is the new research arm of the Seidman School of Business's Facilities Management Program. Its efforts will focus on four areas of development.

- Federally funded research from such agencies as NASA and the National Science Foundation.
- Contract research for business and industry.
- A data base of research from which business and industry can access facilities management information. This project has already started with funding from the state's Research Excellence and Economic Development Fund.
- A research broker to help define a business environment problem and then locate an appropriate researcher to address that problem.

In addition, Barbara Wise sees the Center in the future as providing a practical research experience or internship for Facilities Management master's degree students at GVSU, as well as Ph.D. candidates from other institutions.

Jim concurs. "Cooperation with other area institutions and an exchange of information with local business and industry is a vital part of our goal for the Center," he says. "The world is an integrated place. If you solve one problem, you can apply the solution in lots of other places."

For example, Jim and Barbara have studied Isolated Confined Environments (ICE) and Remote Isolated Confined Environments (RICE) for NASA. Their findings there can be applied to many other areas. "ICE's include off-shore oil platforms, desert stations, outer space stations, and

undersea habitats," Barbara says. "What we've found necessary for those living and working in those environments can also be applied in some ways to modern urban work environments."

Jim sees advantages to the Center's being located in west Michigan, the national hub for the office systems industry. "We're looking forward to a healthy cooperation with the office systems giants located here," he says. "Our access to and capability for research, coupled with their practical knowledge, has the potential for making west Michigan even stronger in its emerging national prominence as the seat of facilities management expertise."

In addition to Barbara Wise, who serves as a research associate, the Center's staff also includes Bill Bavinger, who has come to Grand Valley State from Houston, Texas, where he directed the Architecture Computer Lab at Rice University and ran his own consulting firm, specializing in computer mapping and data-base management. "Bill has already set up a starting facilities management data base that will prove invaluable to students, business, and industry in this area," Jim says. He added that the Center plans to expand that data base with new and more extensive facilities management research as it becomes available.

The Center for Integrated Facilities Research will be housed in GVSU's new Grand Rapids Center when it opens in 1988. The new facility will include modern laboratory space where the staff will conduct much of their applied research.

Jim is confident that the varied background and expertise of that staff will greatly enhance the Center's sphere of capabilities in servicing the facilities management needs of this community and beyond. "We've already observed some of the needs in this area," Jim says, "and we see ways in which our Center can help. Our goal is to assist people in managing their business environments by providing the research that will give them the information they need to make effective decisions about how those environments should both perform and be formed."



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