



Case Study: San Mateo County Community College District

Used on three campuses, SP Controls' Pixie offers easy, effective control of classroom AV equipment

Spanning the region between San Francisco and the Silicon Valley, the San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD) serves over 40,000 students. Three campuses – the College of San Mateo, Cañada College and Skyline College – provide students a two-year education in a variety of vocational technical programs as well as studies that can be transferred to 4-year colleges and universities.

Over the past few years, the SMCCCD has been renovating and updating classrooms on its campuses, adding “smart classroom” technology as well as modernizing the facilities. The “smart classrooms” include built-in projection equipment and media centers for connection of laptop computers, document cameras, DVD players and other media. Rooms waiting for renovation are currently using rollaround media carts. “Our instructors rely on the media technology, but they want it to be easy to use,” says Jim Petromilli, SMCCCD Director of Instructional Technology. Petromilli’s team decided the best solution for easy control of AV equipment would be the installation of control panels to replace handheld remotes.

“We had several criteria for choosing a control system,” Petromilli says. “First and foremost, it had to be easy to use. Next, we wanted a consistent user experience, meaning a teacher could walk into any room and be able to activate the AV equipment, and they would be able to do it the same way every time. We wanted a setup time of three minutes or less from the time the instructor enters the room with a laptop computer. We also wanted a small form factor in the control system; we wanted it to be a low maintenance device, and we wanted it to be easily upgradeable.” Using these criteria, the ITS team evaluated a number of control systems and selected the SP Controls Pixie for use in the SMCCCD complex. “The Pixie met all of those criteria perfectly, and it was inexpensive as well,” says Petromilli.

The SP Controls Pixie is a complete control system in a surprisingly trim form factor; it's so small, it fits in a simple sin-

gle-gang back box and uses a Decora™ wall plate for trim. One Pixie can control two or more display devices, providing separate buttons for power, AV sources and volume up/down. Operation is intuitive; a glance reveals how to control the room devices. The unit is easily installed and set up; an infrared emitter is placed against the receiver of the projector to ensure accurate commands with each button press on the unit, and the Pixie has the ability to learn the IR commands of a remote through a few simple steps.

Once installed, only the critical functions needed for operation are presented to users through the Pixie control panel. Pixies in SMCCCD classrooms are used for projector, source and audio control. “With the Pixie, we’re able to set up the equipment and know it won’t be inadvertently messed up by someone pressing the wrong button,” says Mike Tyler, media technician at Cañada College. “When you are dealing with remotes, there are too many things that can go wrong. One example



Students work on lab projects in a biology class at Skyline College. The AV cabinet houses connections to equipment as well as the SP Controls Pixie, which is used to operate the ceiling mounted projector.



A closeup of an AV cabinet. The Pixie controller on the left is the same size as the power outlet, and eliminates the need for remotes for the projector and audio.

of a problem we used to have is that people would accidentally reset the projector to the factory defaults and since we mount the projectors upside down in the room, they would end up with an inverted image... or they'd start playing with the focus controls and not be able to get back to where they started. With the Pixie, those controls aren't there so the problems can't happen."

To further simplify installation in the classrooms, the Pixie units take advantage of the audio output of the projectors in the room. All audio goes into the projector, and audio follows video on the projectors so when sources are switched, the proper audio comes up with the video. Audio outputs are fed into an amplifier and the Pixie is used to control volume up/down.

up channels on the walls to the projector; in renovated classrooms, Pixies are mounted on the side of a media center adjacent to connection points for laptop computers.

Between the three campuses in the SMCCD, 179 "smart classrooms" are currently outfitted with Pixie controllers and others are in the queue for updating. In older rooms, the Pixies are wall mounted with wires running

"We're big on 'simple' here," says Petromilli. "The easy operation of the Pixie keeps things running smoothly in the classrooms and keeps our service calls down." Tyler concurs. "We aren't getting many calls from the Pixie-outfitted classrooms," he says, "and in classrooms where we haven't done the updates yet, the teachers ask 'When are we going to get the Pixies in this classroom?' Our plan is to put them in all of the smart classrooms."

About SP Controls:

SP Controls, Inc., founded in 1995, is a manufacturer of innovative audio-visual control products. The company is based on the belief that simple, intuitive control of complex audio-visual equipment is both possible and necessary. SP Controls' AV control, video/audio distribution, audio, networking, and mounting products are widely used in educational and corporate environments, making AV systems easier to use for everyone.

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