RESEARCH IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT of any dynamic field, and this is particularly true of information technology. In 1999, the President’s Information Technology Advisory Committee reports concluded, “Information technology (IT) will be one of the key factors driving progress in the 21st century. Vigorous information technology research is essential for achieving America’s 21st century aspirations.”

The Information Technology Research Center (ITRC) in the Sam M. Walton College of Business was established in 1999 to meet the needs of this rapidly growing discipline. It supports a variety of activities, from fundamental research to “Executives in the Classroom,” which also help the Information Systems Department serve the needs of the academic and corporate communities.

As an interdisciplinary research center, the ITRC has a mission to advance research in the development and use of information technology to enhance the performance of individuals and organizations. It promotes the exchange of ideas between the academic and business communities.

“One of the important functions of the ITRC is as a forum of information exchange. In addition to company-specific and industry-level research, the ITRC holds three or four roundtable discussions each year among its members on important issues they are facing,” ITRC brings in a facilitator with expertise in the topic area, and member companies that have an interest in the topic send representatives.

“The ITRC membership structure is key to the success of the roundtable,” Hardgrave said. “We chose to restrict membership so that there are no direct competitors. This greatly facilitates the free exchange of ideas.”

The ITRC also contributes to the education mission of the Walton College by promoting interaction between students and information technology executives. Three programs in particular—the IT Executive Forum, the IT “Executives in the Classroom,” and the IT Career Fair—give students an opportunity to interact with IT professionals and learn from their experience.

Each fall, the ITRC sponsors an IT Executive Forum, which is webcast and simulcast to several colleges in Arkansas. A panel of IT executives from ITRC member companies comes to Fayetteville to meet with students, make brief presentations and answer students’ questions. A video of the most recent IT Executive Forum is available online at http://itrc.uark.edu.

IT executives also come to campus throughout the year to participate in the ITRC “Executives in the Classroom” program. They attend classes and interact with students, providing them with a real-world view of the business community. In conjunction with the Career Development Center, the ITRC hosts IT Career Fairs during each fall and spring semester. During the last academic year, 25 companies and nearly 600 students participated in the IT Career Fairs.

In addition to bringing the academic and business communities closer together, the ITRC also engages larger issues, such as the Arkansas IT workforce problem. It is a chicken-and-egg problem where IT graduates must leave the state because there are no jobs and businesses will not locate in Arkansas because there is a shortage of IT workers.

The ITRC began that process in 1999 when it hosted the first IT Summit. The Summit brought together educators, employers and government officials to define the problem, forge partnerships and identify the leverage points for action. While the first IT Summit identified problems, the second Summit, in 2000, focused on solutions. Reports on research into the IT Workforce and Economic Research highlighted the importance of state investment in higher education.

Research Role

Fundamentally, though, the mission of the ITRC is research. During 2001, the ITRC supported research by faculty from information systems, marketing and transportation, accounting and management.

The ITRC supports research in a variety of ways, including:

- providing grants, which are awarded on a competitive basis;
- helping faculty secure grants from other sources, such as the National Science Foundation;
- supporting the research process, including creating and distributing surveys, purchasing data sets, entering and validating data;
- coordinating efforts with ITRC member institutions; and
- matching faculty and organizations for research activities.

The ITRC supports three basic types of research. Proprietary research looks at an issue that is specific to a member firm and is not applicable to other companies. Specialized research may be commissioned by a member firm, but it has relevance for other organizations and is usually shared with other members. Common research is applicable to many different companies; the data are aggregated to hide the identities of participating organizations and to produce generalized results and conclusions.

Results of many ITRC common research projects are available as working papers. Subjects range from “Understanding IT Employee Resistance to Change” to “IT Workforce Motivation, Retention and Turnover” and include small business e-commerce and computer training issues, among others.