How can an individual keep up with the work in his field?

ATLANTA — The libraries of 25 predominantly black colleges and universities may grow to encompass tens of millions of books and journals across the United States as a result of a workshop held at Atlanta University recently.

The workshop was organized by the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory of the University of California and Atlanta University under the sponsorship of the Energy Research Administration (ERDA).

The workshop addressed one of the central questions faced by scholars and researchers nationwide: in an information saturated world, how can one person keep up with all important work in his field?

The answer is straightforward and the means have been available to the larger and wealthier schools and research organizations for years — link into one or more nationwide information retrieval systems by computer.

Such systems respond to queries within seconds, listing, for example, all articles published within the past five years on a plant disease of interest to agricultural scientists, or four current books on teaching the mentally handicapped, or all publications by a certain astrophysicist on the origin of the solar system.

Very few predominantly black schools have had access to such systems, however, according to Isom Harrison, chemist and technical specialist at the Livermore Laboratory library. Harrison himself is black and a graduate of one of the schools that attended the workshop.

The reasons for low participation among predominantly black schools are several. Perhaps the most important, according to Harrison, is lack of familiarity; many small schools are unaware of the information systems or their potential advantages of faculty.

Another reason is the cost of keeping up-to-date with information retrieval — most commonly accomplished by attending regular conferences, each of which may cost a thousand dollars or more.

The hardware required for joining one of the systems is not terribly expensive. It consists basically of a $1,700 teletype or communications terminal and a telephone.

The purpose of the week's workshop was to show participants — experts in library science from the 25 attending schools — how two complementary nationwide systems work.

One system is ERDA RECON — a network maintained by the Energy Research and Development Administration. ERDA RECON concentrates on energy-related work. Ask the system via teletype - telephone for information on solar cell fabrication, and two minutes later it produces a listing of 118 technical articles and books.

The other system is SDS ORBIT, a commercial network belonging to the systems Development Corporation of Santa Monica, California. SDS ORBIT provides similar kinds of bibliographic data on a much broader spectrum of subjects, ranging from education to agriculture.

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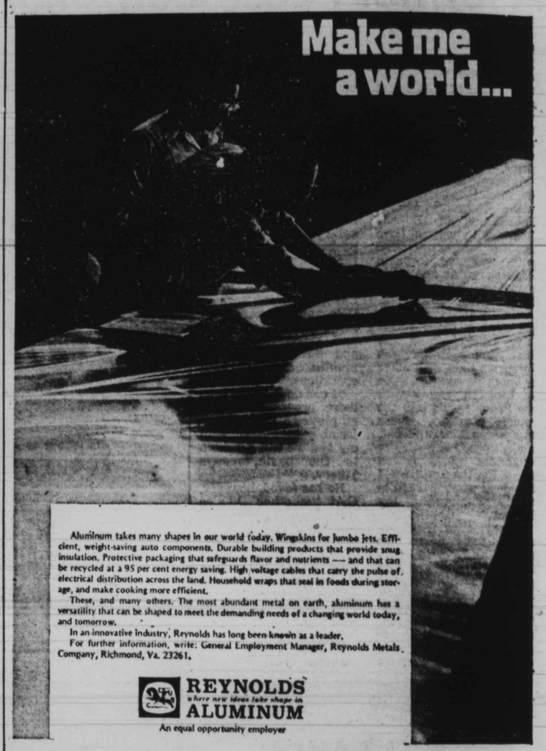

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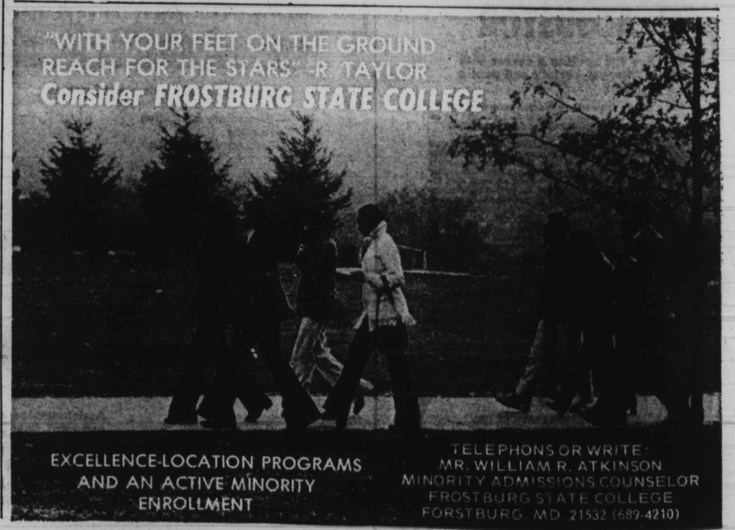

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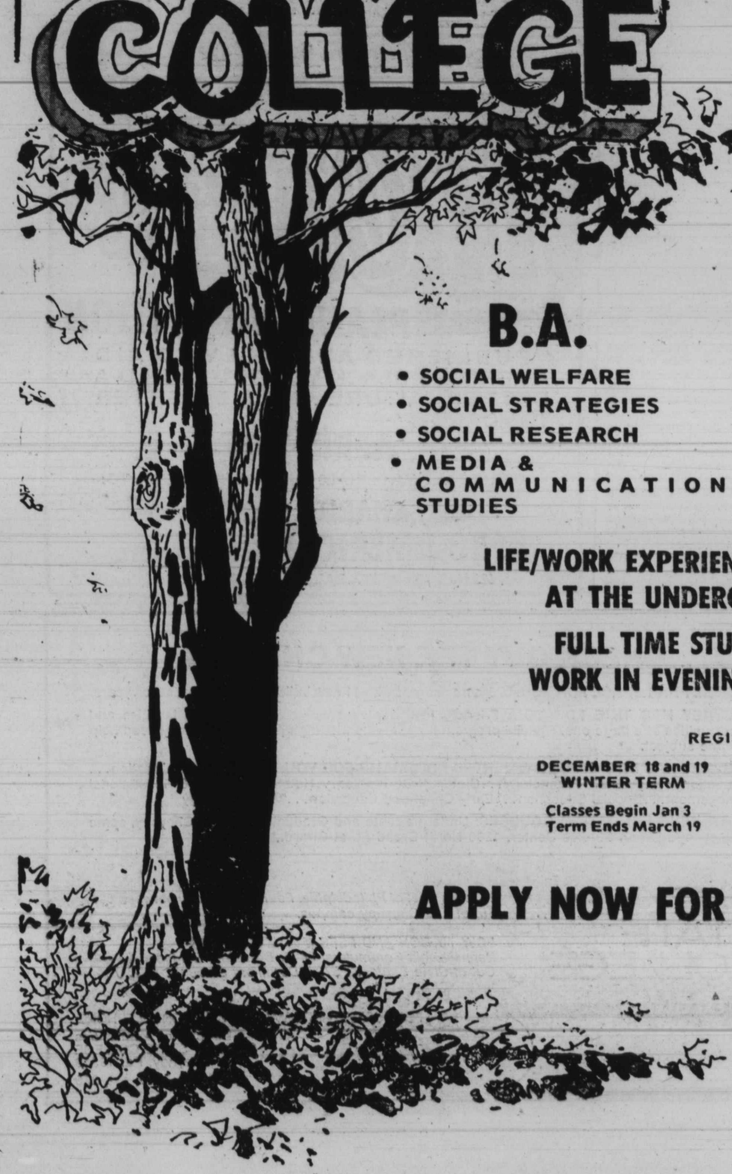

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