“Investing in IPR/IFRA is investing not only in education, but above all in agriculture”

On December 15, some 700 people packed an amphitheatre in Katibougou to see high-speed internet pour onto the campus. Nearly all faculty and students of IPR/IFRA were there, many wearing custom T-shirts commemorating the event. Mali’s Minister of Education was on the stage, along with the governor, USAID/Mali officials, and local dignitaries. The minister clicked a mouse and was connected, via video conference projected on the amphitheater’s screen, to MSU Agricultural Economics Professor Eric Crawford and Ph.D. student Goita Marthe Diallo, who were in Agriculture Hall in East Lansing, Michigan, 5,000 miles away.

The maiden voyage of the computer hook-up had an especially personal touch. Diallo was the top graduate from IPR/IFRA in 1998. Now she was back on the Mali campus again, bigger than life courtesy of the new video conferencing technology. When she began to speak, the room in Katibougou burst into applause.

USAID and the Malian Government have purchased over 60 new computers to help faculty and students take advantage of the new connectivity. MSU put together training sessions and free access to online resources and arranged Skype software to provide free Internet telephone and video-conferencing.

Already, the collaborations are heating up. Mel Yokoyama, professor of animal science at MSU, is using Skype to communicate with his IPR/IFRA research partner, Boubacar Dembele, who just spent three months working in Yokoyama’s lab in East Lansing and who has now returned to Mali. Mathieu Ngouajio, an MSU assistant professor of horticulture, already has brought in wireless routers to IPR/IFRA, which will facilitate the school becoming a center for short-courses, including using material online from MSU. Stephen Esquith, professor and chair of philosophy at MSU, is using MSU’s web-based ANGEL system to conduct an ethics course and discussion groups at the Mali ag school while working there on a Fulbright scholarship.

“This school was regarded as somewhat backwards because of the lack of Internet access,” Staatz said. “Now it will become a lot more attractive. There’s a lot to grow here.” And both the faculty members, students, and local populations have pledged to make the best use of this long-awaited connectivity and the equipment that made it possible — S. Nichols.