The new program works with what small companies have learned from experience — those with special computer skills are needed in business.

It had to happen. Computers have infiltrated almost every aspect of our lives. It was inevitable that they would make their way into business administration courses.

The newest offering from USL's College of Business Administration offers to take graduates into the next millennium. The Business Systems Administration Technology degree was added to the college's curriculum in December.

"We're a cross-disciplinary approach," said Hal Langford, head of the department of business systems analysis and technology. "We use expertise out of computer science and industrial technology and specialized business courses in information technology in addition to the core business courses."

It's an idea whose time has come, Langford said. "There is a huge growing need," he said. "Even small businesses need a computer-tech person."

The course teaches future business people to put information into the computer and take it out in forms that are usable.

The idea came about, Langford said, almost as a product of evolution.

"What happened, quite frankly, is that most businesses grew their own computer people. And especially in small and medium-sized businesses, they did their own business, plus the computer side of it because they enjoyed it."

There is a real need in the business community for people with such specialized skills, said Jim Underwood, the new dean of the College of Business Administration. "After having surveyed our customers who include people who employ our graduates, we saw the need for a program that focuses on applications that used computers to solve business problems."

Word of the new program has already gotten out in the business world. "We feel industry is calling for these kinds of people. A lot of folks have expressed interest in future graduates we might have," Langford said.

The first BSAT students are expected to graduate in May 2000.

Graduates from the BSAT program would know the business end of their operation, in addition to the technical side of managing information. "Our graduates would be responsible for network systems; they would be systems analysts. They would make sure the whole computer operation in the business would be operating."

Producing cyber-smart professionals seems appropriate as the turn of the century approaches. But it was a far different atmosphere just after the previous turn of the century, when the school was established.

In 1902, the Department of Business was only part of the College of Liberal Arts of what was then known as the Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute. By 1926, the first Bachelor of Science in Business Administration was awarded.

At that time, the faculty still consisted of only three instructors: the head of the department, a professor of accounting and auditing and a stenography instructor.

In 1952, the department had grown so much that it became the College of Commerce and by 1968, it was the third largest college on campus, with its students making up 17 percent of the university's total enrollment.

One of the first courses to be offered as part of USL's business curriculum was secretarial science. In earlier days, the secretarial program was the largest department in the college. Over the years, however, the demand for the major declined, partly because of computer technology that enables business people to do their own secretarial work. By 1990, the secretarial program with its overwhelmingly female population, had faded out.

One thing seems to provide little continuity of sorts. The first graduates in the new BSAT program — all two of them — will be women.