

Student Technology Access at a Technical University

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Abstract

In Fall 2018 the Oregon Institute of Technology Klamath Falls Campus Library began a pilot project to check out laptops. While this may seem like a no brainer in the modern world of libraries and mobile access, the library was slow to adopt a laptop checkout program due to concerns about both the upfront cost of purchasing the laptops and charging cart and about the logistics of checkout. The decision to begin the pilot was based on data from the Measuring Higher Education Library & IT Services (MISO) survey which measures how faculty, students, and staff view library and technology services (Bryn Mawr College, 2019), and the issues faced from hardwired technology aging out. This article looks at the reasons for implementing the pilot project and provides an analysis of the first term as well as future steps and recommendations.

Literature review

Beginning in the early 2000's, many large academic libraries began implementing laptop loan programs (Buzzard & Teetor, 2011; Feldmann, Wess, & Moothart, 2008). As laptops became the standard for students at universities across the country (Brooks & Pomerantz, 2017), smaller academic libraries began adding laptop checkout to their services as well (Gutierrez & Summey, 2011). The proliferation of library laptop checkout programs is aligned with most academic libraries' mission of supporting student success. When surveyed, ninety-nine percent of students responded that laptops were at least moderately important to their academic success (Brooks & Pomerantz, 2017). Similarly, MISO survey data collected in 2015 highlighted the importance of place based library services, including equipment checkouts, quiet space, and group study space, to students (Baker, et al., 2018). The results of the Oregon Institute of Technology (Oregon Tech)'s MISO survey in 2017 reinforce these results with quiet study space and group study space listed as the top student priorities, and quiet study space listed as the top student use.

What students are using when it comes to resources are highly based in technology. The same 2017 MISO survey at Oregon Tech shows that students access online resources, use library databases, and access the library website far more than the physical collections. Generation Z, those born from 1995 to 2010, expect information and resources at their fingertips (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). To this incoming generation, there is no journal on a shelf. If it is not electronically available, it is not worth it (Hope, 2016). Focus groups at Oregon Tech in 2015 showed students were using Google, YouTube, and other web services to research. According to ACRL Metrics, average initial physical circulation for baccalaureate colleges is down over 1,000 from 2015 to 2017. Conversely, average initial circulation for digital and electronic resources were up by almost 30,000 for the same time period (ACRL Metrics, 2015, 2017).

In the MISO survey we did not ask usage of or, the importance of borrowing laptops, because the service was not yet available. We did ask the importance of support for laptop and desktop computing problems. For Oregon Tech students, computing support was more important than the respondent average across all participating universities in the 2017 cohort. We did not ask about laptop or device ownership, but those in the cohort that did ask show low percentage in the results. We did ask faculty and staff about use and importance of technology in classrooms and meeting spaces. These were rated as high use by faculty, and high importance by faculty and staff. It is not feasible to supply every classroom with enough desktop computers to support all classes in session at the same time. It is not sustainable to replace and maintain these computers at the rate needed to keep up with student learning needs.

What we did

The Oregon Tech library has engaged in heavy weeding over the past few years. The library's collections reflect the university focus on technology. Given the pace of technology change, these collections age rapidly, and there is not always the budget to support new physical materials to replace them. What is relevant to the students then? Technology. Oregon Tech has two campuses, each with their own library. At the Portland Metro campus, the library has worked with the laboratories' management to supply relevant technology that is not always feasible or readily available to students. This includes multimeters, RF antenna, and oscilloscopes to name a few. For the Klamath Falls campus, the population is not centralized to a single building, and lugging an oscilloscope across campus is not feasible. However, a laptop in a bag is perfectly reasonable.

20 laptops, bags for each laptop, and a cart to store them in were purchased from the library's materials budget in spring of 2018. In the fall 2018 the Klamath Falls campus library made these laptops available for students to check out. The pilot shared many similarities to the Portland State University Library's 2011 laptop checkout pilot (Dorhofer & Gunderson, 2016) including limiting checkouts to two hours. In addition to checkout time, the library needed to finalize a variety of details including, but not limited to, determining late and replacement fees, communicating responsibility to borrowers, and finding a location for the laptop charging cart. Active collaboration between library management and frontline staff included regular meetings and information sharing as well as group buy-in as to the 'pilot' nature of the program. This allowed the library to create laptop borrowing policies and processes that reflected input from various stakeholders and worked for everyone.

The laptop checkout pilot officially launched at the end of September 2018 in time for the start of the academic year. Librarians advertised laptops at faculty development sessions during convocation and via email. The library also used physical signage in the form of whiteboards, digital signage on a reader board in the lobby, and social media to advertise the new laptop program to students.

On average the laptops were checked out 11 times each during fall term. The laptop with the most checkouts was checked out 23 times, and the one with the least was only checked out once. The median number of checkouts was 10. Every laptop was used and checked out. As students started to take advantage of the new laptops, awareness of the pilot spread organically among students and the library began to receive positive comments from students who were using the program.

Future

Also, in fall of 2018 the Klamath County Library began a Chromebook checkout program. Community members, including Oregon Tech students, are able to check out these for 7 days. Based on this and feedback from Oregon Tech library users, the library extended the checkout on university laptops to 4 hours beginning in January 2019. The pilot will be evaluated in closer detail at the end of spring term with further updates and evaluation planned for summer and beyond. While there is not currently a plan to participate in current or future MISO cohorts, laptop and equipment check out will be included in other library assessments.

A challenge discovered during the pilot was the narrowness of the space between shelves on the laptop cart. This proved problematic because it made removing and replacing the laptops more challenging and time consuming. Additional attention to the size specifications of both the laptops and the cart could have helped avoid this issue but the current solution is to either purchase a new, larger cart or to purchase an additional cart of the same model and divide the laptops. Challenges such as this will continue as the pilot progresses and will be addressed in the full pilot evaluation.

The library continues to purchase equipment and resources based on student need and feedback collected through regular whiteboard surveys (see Table 1) and spontaneous patron interactions.

Table 1. Results of whiteboard survey on laptop checkout times

Checkout Time	# Votes
4 hours	4
6 hours	0
8 hours	1
12 hours	0
10 hours	2
24 hours	8
3 day	3
7 days	6
Total Votes	24

The library recently purchased graphing calculators, whiteboards, whiteboard markers, headphones, and other equipment for checkout on both campuses. While these materials do not necessarily directly support student research and information needs in the traditional sense, they were identified by students and front line staff as being in demand and are a step closer to bringing students into the library to discover further services and resources available.

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