

The Laptop Experience at OSU

Valery King

Reference and Government Information Librarian
The Valley Library
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR

Jeanne Davidson

Physical Sciences Librarian
The Valley Library
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR

Introduction

The Valley Library at Oregon State University has been making laptops available for OSU students, faculty and staff use since 1999. The library began checking out laptops and promoting personal laptop use to capitalize on the increased network capabilities in the new library building and to expand access to the library's electronic resources. Demand for computers exceeded the number available in the library and patrons wanted access to resources from all areas of the building, not just in the Information Commons.

Several steps were involved in setting up laptop services in the library, particularly those checked out by the library. These steps included: funding and acquisition of the laptops, establishing policies for use, ensuring security for the machines, and establishing processes and personnel for maintenance and service for the laptops.

Library-Owned Laptops

Students want flexibility in where they work, such as quieter areas, areas to work cooperatively with other students, or closer proximity to the collections they are using. Laptops meet this need, but not all students own one. Students who do own laptops often find it cumbersome to carry one around and prefer to use equipment already located in the library.

Getting Started

The Valley Library's laptop program has relied heavily on gift funds. Laptops are an ideal focus for fundraising because donors have a tangible product for their donation. Laptops are seen as innovative and directly impacting student education.

The first laptops used in the program were purchased in 1999 through a gift requested from the Tarbell Family Foundation. The library matched their startup gift with unrestricted library gift funds to purchase ten ProGen laptop computers. An additional ten were funded by a gift from the Burlingham Foundation in 2000. Then, in 2002, prompted by significant advances in laptop technology, the library purchased twenty new Dell laptops using another gift from the Burlingham Foundation. The new laptops replaced

the nearly obsolete ProGens and included wireless network cards to take advantage of recently installed wireless technologies in the library. A total of 20 are currently available for checkout. The best of the old ProGen computers were then made available for library staff to use.

Policies for Use of Library-owned Laptops

The Information Commons Implementation Group, comprised of personnel from library systems, student computing facilities, reference and access services, developed the policies. Our process involved determining the issues to address, benchmarking practices elsewhere on campus and at other institutions, and making the draft policy available for comment.

The primary issues we addressed included:

- ?? *Who can check out laptops?* Any OSU student, faculty or staff can use the laptops. Initially, only a valid OSU ID card was required.
- ?? *How long can a laptop be checked out? What are the penalties for late or no return?* Check out period is three hours with one renewal if no one else is waiting. Late returns are charged \$10 per hour to a maximum fine of \$200. A standard replacement cost plus processing fee is charged when a laptop is not returned.
- ?? *How will we track who has a given computer?* We create item records in the library catalog for each laptop. Initially, we kept a paper record of checkouts.
- ?? *Can laptops leave the building?* Our laptops are for in-library use only. Each laptop is security tagged and stenciled to make it obvious that it belongs to the library.
- ?? *Can laptops be reserved or is this strictly first-come, first-served?* Developing a reservation system was too complicated, so checkout is strictly first-come, first-served.
- ?? *How will new users learn how to use them?* Basic operating instructions are included in the case for each laptop.

Ensuring Security

We faced two types of security issues particular to the laptops: theft and integrity of the machine's hardware. We addressed the issues in different ways.

To guard against theft and/or use of stolen identification, we developed a process in which the patron presented two forms of photo ID when signing the liability form. The form was then checked against our library catalog patron records for authentication. A "Laptop OK" tag would then be placed in the patron's record as a quick alert that the patron had been authorized to check out a laptop. Laptop check out originally took place at the "Technical Service Desk" near the Reference Desk. Because the students working at this desk did not have authorization to change patron records, there was a 24-hour delay before a patron could check out a laptop. We recently moved the service to Circulation where staff can authenticate immediately so patrons no longer need to wait 24 hours.

Maintaining the integrity and working conditions of the laptops was challenging. We quickly learned that savvy patrons would take memory, network cards, battery packs or other parts from our machines. To deter these activities, we set up a process for

systematically checking each machine when it was returned. To speed up the process, we covered each “vulnerable” area with security tape, which clearly reveals at a glance any tampering. We instituted a series of “fines” for tampering with the security tape, broken network cables or other damage.

Personnel for Maintenance and Service

High quality equipment greatly reduces the work required for maintenance and repair. The original ProGen machines required a fair amount of maintenance, especially as they aged. The new Dell computers have significantly decreased the amount of maintenance time required. In addition, internal wireless network cards dramatically decreased the need for replacing damaged network cables. The library systems department (later to become Library Technology Support) became de-facto maintainers of the laptops.

Most of the staff time needed for the service has been devoted to check out and return inspection processes. Our workflow processes have been streamlined significantly by moving the service to the Circulation Desk. Now only two departments need to coordinate service rather than three.

Usage

Use of the library’s laptops increased rapidly at the beginning, leveled off after about a year and a half, then declined beginning mid-2001 as heavy use and approaching obsolescence of our equipment reduced availability and usability. The quality of student laptops outpaced the library’s machines in technological advancement, so many students were bringing in their own machines. Usage increased dramatically in the second part of 2002 after the library’s old laptops were replaced with the 20 new machines.

Having reliable, up-to-date equipment is essential to the success of a laptop-lending program. As evidenced by our usage statistics, the library’s laptops need to be of roughly equal capability to the students’ own computers. Luckily, the attractiveness of laptops as funding opportunities makes regular replacement possible.

Personal Laptop Use

We have had an increasing number of OSU students and faculty wanting to use the library’s network with their own laptops. To facilitate this access and to ensure security of our network, the laptop owner must register her/his laptop with the library. The patron submits basic information (e.g. patron and network card information) that is entered into the library’s system. After this information is entered, the patron is contacted and works with one of the library technology staff to configure her/his laptop to work on our network.

The recent introduction of ONID (**OSU Network IDentification**) computer accounts for all university students, faculty, and staff has improved library network security. Authentication of users is much quicker because personal laptop owners must access the registration pages through an ONID account, which automatically provides an initial security screening. In addition, anyone using the network must log on with an ONID name and password. Access to the library’s network will be simplified because students will ultimately be able to access all campus networks with a single laptop registration.

Conclusion

The laptop services offered at the Valley Library since 1999 have been quite successful and show promise for the future. Several recent changes have improved the service. Addition of wireless technology to the building has made the library's laptops much easier to use and patrons are increasingly purchasing wireless network cards for their laptops and registering them with the library. The wireless technology has greatly increased the flexibility of laptop use within the library as patrons are no longer limited to the physical location of active data ports. In addition, the library is currently submitting proposals for student Technology Resource Fee grants to help pay for 10 additional laptops and to increase the number of wireless network ports available in the building. Advancing laptop technologies and expanding wireless capabilities ensure that laptop use will continue to grow.