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Shall We Continue Laptop Services?

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by Li Chen and Dr. Joyce Mills

Background

Offering wireless laptops in libraries became very popular starting in 2001, according to a survey done by Hugh Holden and Ma Lei Hsieh.[1] The Lawrence V. Johnson Library at Southern Polytechnic State University began lending two laptops in Fall, 2004. The proposal for this service was prepared by Johnson Library and submitted through the Student Government Association of the University to its Technology Fee Committee for consideration. The library's proposal was funded and two laptops were purchased. The service was announced at the Circulation Desk with the understanding that laptops could be used only in the library. The loan period was two hours initially but was increased to four hours. Signage at circulation indicated the service was available. Technical support was provided by the IT department of the University. All laptops have wireless access, the Microsoft Office Suite and Faronics Deep Freeze. When students turn off the laptops, all of their work is erased from the computers. Work can be saved on personal flash drives.

This has been a welcome addition to the library's service offerings. From 2004 through 2007 there was a steadily increasing demand for laptop services at the Johnson Library. This demand resulted in the acquisition of additional laptops, bringing the total available number of laptop computers to five. However, in 2008, we began to experience fewer requests for this service.

We decided to closely examine this service to determine:

 1. Is demand for loaner laptop computers decreasing? If so, by how much?

 2. Should the service be continued? If so, how should it be continued?

 3. What do students use the borrowed laptops for?

 4. If continued, what service or equipment changes might be necessary?

Methodology

A circulation report and two surveys were used in this study.

A circulation report was created to collect check-out data for each year the service has been offered. From the check-out data, we found an increasing demand for laptop services beginning in 2004 (when the service was first offered) to 2006. However, beginning in 2007, we found demand for laptops decreased each year. In 2007 it dropped by seven percent when compared with 2006 data. In 2008, requests for loaner laptops dropped by an astonishing 50 percent when compared to 2007. The trend continued in 2007, and in 2009. The demand for loaner library laptop services was declining dramatically, seen in table 1.

Table 1

Year	Laptops Checked Out
2004	57
2005	567
2006	598
2007	556
2008	276
2009	247

Two surveys were conducted in March 2009 and October 2010 in order to gather user opinion regarding laptop lending services in the library. Questions were added/changed in the second survey in order to improve the wording of the questions and obtain more useful information. All participants were guaranteed anonymity but demographic data was recorded. The survey design was multiple-choice, with some questions offering more than one selection/answer. Survey forms were handed to students when they approached the circulation desk to borrow a laptop or reserve book, or to pick up an ILL/GIL text that had arrived from offsite.

All completed survey forms were returned and the results of both surveys were tallied.

Results and analysis
In survey one, 120 forms were distributed and 101 were returned. The response rate was 83 percent. In survey two, 100 forms were distributed and 95 students responded. The response rate was 95 percent.

In both surveys, second year students had the highest response rate, followed by first year, third year, fourth year, fifth year and graduate respondents respectively. One minor exception was a tie for third and four year student in survey two, shown in table 2.

Table 2

	Survey One 2009 Respondent=101	Survey Two 2010 Respondent=95
First Year	21.8%	19%
Second Year	25.7%	31%
Third Year	20.8%	14%
Four Year	17.8%	14%
Five Year	9.9%	12%
Grad. student	0.4%	3%
No Response	3.6%	7%

In survey one, only 0.1 percent of the student respondents had learned of the loaner laptop service through a class on library services. Survey one resulted on our more strongly emphasizing the loaner laptop service through our library service classes. In survey two, eight percent of the participants learned of this service through our library classes, a significant increase in awareness. See table 3 below for data on how respondents learned of this library service.

Table 3

Informed by:

	Survey One '09	Survey Two '10
Library Service Class	0.1%	8.0%
Friend or classmate	20.8%	13.7%
Word of mouth	6.0%	20.0%
I asked	0.1%	4.0%
Survey	19.8%	1.0%
No Response	53.29%	53.3%

We believed that in conducting survey one, we would generate more publicity for the loaner service, and awareness would increase on the part of student using the library (all of them potential users of the loaner laptop service). But on the contrary, in survey one, 43.5 percent of the students responded that they knew the library offered this service, while 56.5 percent of the students were not aware. While in survey two: 36.8 percent of the student respondents knew of this service and 63.2 percent did not know.

Table 4

	Survey One	Survey Two
Know the service	43.5%	36.8%
Do not know the service	56.5%	63.2%

In survey one, 11.9 percent of the survey participants checked out laptops. In survey two, only 9.5 percent checked out laptops. The check out data from the circulation report also proved fewer students were making use of this service.

The survey addressed the question of whether students would use the service had they known about it. Specifically, would they or would they not have checked out the laptops. In survey one, 48.5 percent responded "yes" and 31.6 percent "no," while in survey two, the number of respondents for "yes "declined to 43.2 percent and the number for those responding "no" increased to 44.2 percent.

Why didn't students check-out laptops? Apart from not knowing about the service, it was discovered that laptop ownership jumped from 44.5 percent when survey one was conducted to 74.7 percent when survey two was undertaken. The data showed far more students objected to the policy regarding damage of the laptop while in the hands of a borrower (only 0.01 percent in survey one cited this as an issue, while 4 percent of respondents in survey two did) as a factor in why they would not borrow a laptop. The loan period was increased from two hours to four hours after survey one, and a slight drop in students citing this as a reason for not using the service was noted (a one percent drop). "In-house use only" policy as a factor was cited far more often in survey two - five times more often. Nonetheless, we concluded the main reason for student response that they do not use this service is they have their own laptop.

Does it mean that these students do not need nor especially want to borrow the Library laptops?

Table 5

Reasons for not checking out a laptop

	Survey One	Survey Two
Own laptop	44.6%	74.7%
Rule and policy regarding damage too strict	0.01%	4.0%
Loan period too short	3.0%	2.0%
In house use only	1.0%	5.0%
No response (other)	51.39	14.3%

To answer this question, survey two added a question: "If the library upgrades to newer laptops, would you like to use the service?" Fifty eight percent of the students said "yes" while 34 percent said "no". The rest of them were "not sure." Therefore, we concluded that laptop ownership, in and of itself, does not inhibit a student's desire – potentially – to borrow a laptop from the library.

In survey two, five percent of the students indicated that the library's laptops were too old.

The percentage of students satisfied with using library laptops dropped from 11 percent in survey one to 4 percent in survey two. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the percentage of respondents dissatisfied with library laptops increased from eight percent in survey one to 16 percent in survey two.

In both surveys, "doing research" was the predominant reason for borrowing a library laptop, Fifty-four percent of respondents in survey one and 34 percent in survey two indicated that research needs were the reason they used the service. Surfing the internet and emailing took 33 percent in survey one and 12 percent in survey two.

Summary

There are two main reasons the laptop lending service was underused at SPSU's library.

First, most of the students did not know about the service. It proved insufficient for the library to rely on word of mouth, a sign at the circulation desk and our library website. Second, a majority of the students own their own laptop. Even so, students with or without a laptop feel the laptop service is necessary. In both surveys, the students used laptops primarily to conduct research and surf the internet. A number of students feel library policy regarding the loan of laptop computers is too strict and the technology used is out of date.

Conclusion

We gained useful information from two surveys and a circulation report. We learned that students still prefer the library provide the laptop service, though most of the students have their own laptop. The main reasons for students using laptops were research and internet surfing. In order to support student study while observing the trend towards a high level of personal laptop ownership among the students, we decided to continue laptop services. But we would made adjustments -- we decided to reduce the number of "circulating" laptops from five to two. Meanwhile, we will update our technology and revise our lending policy and procedures to meet the students' needs and expectations.

References:
1. Prisk, Dennis P and Brooks, Monic G (2005) "Hip High-tech purchases Don't always work out as planned," Computers in Libraries, November/December, 2005 pp.10-14.

Further Reading
1. Holden, H. A and Hsienh, M.L. (2007) "The state of wireless laptop lending programs: a survey of academic libraries", Library Hi Tech, vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 260-75.

2. Holden, H. A and Deng, M. (2005) "Taking pro-action: a survey of potential users before the availability of wireless access and the implementation of a wireless notebook computer lending program in an academic library", Library Hi Tech, Vol. 23 No.4 PP.561-75.