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Pilot program brings laptop technology & teaching practices to the classroom at NMCC

Aroostook County -   An exciting new pilot program involving laptop computers and wireless technology is underway this year in Northern Maine Community College's business technology department. "Mobile computing is available anytime, anywhere. The convenience and efficiency with which students can conduct academic, administrative and personal activities is empowering," said Dwight Clayton, chair of the department.

"Research shows that utilizing educational technology, such as mobile computing, encourages critical thinking and analytical skills, improves grades, improves pass rates, and truly makes a difference for students…from developmental to advanced," said Clayton, citing an article in the April/May 2007 *Community College Journal*.

The Mobile Integrated Technology pilot program is being implemented in one section of three different business classes, requiring students in those particular sections to have a laptop computer. Students taking Principles of Accounting I, Introduction to Business or Introduction to Computer Applications had the option of taking the course either in a traditional classroom/computer lab environment or of taking advantage of the new laptop section.

"The MIT Program is more than a laptop initiative…it's about wireless classrooms, technology, and the evolution of classroom instruction," said Clayton. Thanks to a combination of corporate donations and collaborations, faculty enthusiasm and College commitment, these three areas have all come together to make this exciting pilot program possible.

Wireless technology was made a reality on campus last year, thanks to a donation by Katahdin Trust Company to the College's on-going major gifts campaign. The donation was designated to establish a wireless network in the Edmunds and Christie Buildings at the College. NMCC was able to extend that infrastructure over the summer to the entire campus, including residential life areas.

The College also retrofitted a business classroom over the summer, hardwiring the work tables with electrical power so that students would be able to plug in their laptops and adding ergonomically correct chairs. The changes made to the classroom have resulted in several advantages, according to accounting information systems instructor Nancy Cowett, who is among those who teach in the retrofitted classroom and who is teaching one of the classes making use of laptops this semester.

By converting the classroom for laptop use, her accounting students have the benefit of having access to computers during each class, whereas previously they only had access to a computer lab during one class each week. "This gives us the ability to try something in 'real' time," explained Cowett. "On-line, I can show them information on a concept as it is introduced, instead of having to wait for the day that we are in the lab."

As an added benefit, since the pilot laptop classes no longer need to have access to a computer lab, computer lab time, which is always in high demand, is freed up for other classes or student use. Also, because students take their laptops with them after class, this retrofitted room can still easily serve as a 'regular' classroom for other courses.

"We would be doing a disservice to our students to not educate them in technology, because we live in a world of technology," said Cowett. "For instance, no one does manual accounting anymore. When our students are entering the workforce, they are going to be using software, and it is critical that they have experience with that software. We have to be on the front line in this."

In her class, Cowett is using software that is integrated with the course textbook, allowing them to do homework and practice sessions on-line. "They submit their homework and get immediate feedback. Without having to wait for the next class meeting time, they know what answers are right and, more importantly, what the correct answers are for those that are not right. This way they can start practicing the right way, instead of learning it wrong and having to re-learn it later."

In addition to having the grades reported to her, the software allows Cowett to track when a student accessed the homework, how long he or she worked on it, and, collectively, if the class is having problems in any particular area.

Students who opted to take part in this pilot program were given the option of providing their own laptops or leasing one from the College. The College IT staff researched different makes and models of laptop computers, initiated a request for proposal process and selected the best fit for the students and the current College infrastructure. These computers are preloaded with the software necessary to support a student's education in his or her respective business program. Under the agreement, the students received a tremendous discount on their laptops and were able to have the cost charged to their student account, to be paid in four semester payments.

While the laptop is under lease, it is covered under accidental damage protection, with the vendor repairing or replacing the unit and the College's IT department providing support services. A security/theft prevention system is also in place which allows the tracking of a stolen computer, with a guarantee that they will be recovered in 60 days.

The College retains ownership of the laptop during the lease term. Ownership is transferred to the student upon graduation, or the student may opt for an early buyout option.

Forty students took advantage of the College's new laptop lease program this year, the majority of whom were first year students in the College's business administration and accounting information systems programs who are taking part in the pilot program. Several students from other programs also took advantage of the program to lease a laptop.

The pilot program will be expanded next fall to require all students entering the accounting information systems, business administration and nursing programs to have a laptop. Other programs under which students may soon be required to have a laptop include medical office administration and diesel hydraulics technology.

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NMCC accounting information systems instructor Nancy Cowett teaches a group of first year students in her Principles of Accounting I class, utilizing the technology available to students through the College's pilot Mobile Integrated Technology program.