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CSUSB expands its laptop lending program to all students

PALM DESERT, Calif. – As Cal State San Bernardino was forced to move to virtual and online offerings because of the COVID-19 pandemic in April of 2020, university officials realized that they faced another serious problem – the use of computers and internet access for students.

For many students, moving to an online format posed a problem as their home computers or personal laptops had weak signals for connectivity to access the internet, which could hamper or prevent them from attending online classes, completing assignments and homework. Many students who didn't have access to a computer would come to campus to use the university's free computer labs.

Vivian Arias, a graduate student majoring in English, faced the prospect of having to use her smartphone to not only access her online graduate classes, but also "to teach my group exercise classes for our Recreation & Wellness Center. That would have made my life a lot more difficult."

Until the pandemic, CSUSB officials didn't really worry about students having access to technology at their homes, said Samuel Sudhakar, the university's chief information officer and vice president for Information Technology Services (ITS).

"We knew there were inequities that existed, but we didn't pay lot of attention to it because we said to our students 'Come to campus, we'll provide you with world-class technology.' That's been our mantra all along," Sudhakar said. "And the pandemic comes along and we suddenly realized not only students, but faculty and staff didn't have access to good computers, laptops as well as connectivity, internet access."

So ITS moved quickly to adapt and expand the John M. Pfau Library's existing laptop lending program, where students in the library could borrow a laptop computer, but only for a maximum of four hours.

The newly expanded laptop lending program would now allow students to have the laptops for the entire 2020 spring quarter and later for an entire semester when CSUSB moved to a semester system in fall 2020.

To go along with the laptops, the university also provided students with portable mobile hot spots that would deliver internet connectivity from anywhere, Sudhakar said. The department also offered internet connectivity in the Palm Desert Campus parking lots so students could access the internet without leaving their vehicles.

Sudhakar said the university purchased the laptops using funding from the federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF).

"The purpose of the program is to make technology available to the students who cannot afford it, but we have expanded it to all CSUSB students," Sudhakar said.

To date, more than 1,100 students at the San Bernardino and Palm Desert campuses have participated in the program, Sudhakar said.

Arias, whose goal is to teach English at a community college and obtain a Ph.D., said the laptop program was a "godsend" for her.

"Learning and working remotely has had its challenges, but having a reliable laptop to complete my responsibilities made things so much easier," Arias said. "I honestly don't know how I would have fared with only my phone, but I am happy to say I pulled all A's last term and the term before that, all with that laptop, and taught some great classes, if I do say so myself!"

One of the problems ITS faced in the program was getting the word out to students because there was no direct contact as the campus was closed to day-to-day operations. So they put the word out by working with faculty through social media, sending out emails, working with student government and especially word of mouth, which was a big promoter of the program, Sudhakar said.

"In the pandemic environment you don't rub shoulders with a lot of people. It's on more of a formal communication program rather than, you know, if you're on campus carrying these brand new laptops around and a friend asks 'Hey where did you get the laptop?' or 'Hey I went to the library and they gave me a laptop for the whole semester.'"

"The thing that we are proud of about this program is that every student who requested a laptop got one," Sudhakar said.

He thinks the laptops work better for students rather than tablets.

"We have always felt that laptops were a much better device for productivity for students and they're less expensive as well," Sudhakar said. "The feedback we have received from students for the laptop program has been phenomenal."

CSUSB will continue to offer the laptop lending program in the 2021-22 school year and beyond.

"It's open to any and all students – undergraduate and graduate students – as long as they are a current active student on campus," Sudhakar said. "They go to the ITS laptop lending program website and they press a simple form for them to fill out and that's all they do. It is very, very simple to request a laptop."

Arias said she urges her fellow students to use the program.

"I would 100 percent recommend this program to students and have mentioned it to my peers, letting them know how much I have benefitted from it," Arias said. "I think this service is vital to those of us who need reliable technology, like laptops, to access online courses, and don't have the money to go out and buy a new laptop."

The CSUSB Palm Desert Campus offers bachelor's and master's degrees, a doctorate in educational leadership, and teaching credentials and certificates. With more than 1,600 students, it is the Coachella Valley's four-year public university and plays a vital role in educating and training the region's growing population.

For more information about the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, contact Mike Singer in the Office of Strategic Communication at msinger@csusb.edu or (760) 341-2883, ext. 78107, or visit the PDC website at www.csusb.edu/pdc.

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