

Bursaries Reimagined: Addressing Digital Inequity through a Library-Led, University-Wide Laptop Bursary Program

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COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTES

This column examines advances in public-facing library services. The focus is on how broadly framed library services evolve and impact users as well as how diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, usability, and leadership advance service development. The column seeks to bring a broader viewpoint of public services as all services impacting users, beyond traditionally viewed public services such as instruction and education, programming, and circulation. The strength of the column is its broad, international focus and contributors are encouraged to explore issues and recent advances in public services relevant to their geographical region as well as the larger global audience. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor Annie Bélanger at belange1@gvsu.edu.

Bursaries Reimagined: Addressing Digital Inequity through a Library-Led, University-Wide Laptop Bursary Program

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ABSTRACT

The rapid switch to online learning in early 2020 exacerbated problems students were already having with obtaining and maintaining up-to-date devices and a reliable internet connection. MacEwan University Library began offering 4-month term laptop loans at the beginning of the pandemic, but it was clear this was not fully meeting student needs. In response to conversations with faculty and students, the library secured funds from the university's Student Technology Fee to launch a laptop bursary pilot in Winter 2022, which in turn expanded to a university-wide bursary in Fall 2022. This article discusses why an in-kind laptop bursary was the right approach at the right time in this setting; how this initiative contributes to equity and accessibility; and finally, perceptions of the value of this work, its fit within the scope of the library, and how the unique position of the library as a student-focused service and academic unit positioned it well to successfully offer this bursary. Challenges and opportunities for improvement are also discussed.

KEYWORDS



Digital divide; equity; inclusion; laptop-provision; libraries; technology lending; user focus; user service

Introduction

A digital divide exists amongst our student community. Some have stable, ready access to a laptop and internet while others, to varying degrees, are reliant on campus and other publicly accessible computers and wifi. This divide intensified during pandemic circumstances, disproportionately affecting students already grappling with socioeconomic disparities (Lederer et al. 2021). While students

from across the schools and faculties at MacEwan University encountered these challenges, this lack of digital equity emerged as a leading concern for the university's pimâcihisowin Foundation Program¹ (pimâcihisowin) and Child and Youth Care program² (CYC).

pimâcihisowin and Child and Youth Care draw students from communities historically underrepresented in postsecondary institutions, and are

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¹<https://www.macewan.ca/academics/programs/foundation-program-pimacihisowin/>

²<https://www.macewan.ca/academics/programs/bachelor-of-child-and-youth-care/>

relatively small, close-knit programs at MacEwan. *pimâcihisowin*, in *nêhiyawêwin* (the Cree language), means “to create a life of independence.” Launched in 2019, it helps Indigenous students bridge possible gaps between high school credits and the entry requirements for post-secondary diplomas and degrees. It offers students an opportunity to learn and *unlearn* together as they explore and apply Indigenous knowledge in their development of a student identity as individuals and as participants in western academia. Sustained relationality is paramount to learner success in *pimâcihisowin*. Reliable technology and connectivity support this togetherness and success, and supports student advancement into diploma and degree programs. Child and Youth Care, in turn, was one of the earliest degree programs offered at MacEwan. It attracts students from an array of communities and circumstances and holds equity admission spaces in particular for students identifying as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, or Inuit Peoples in Canada). As a highly relational profession, the CYC curriculum and methods of instruction are seeded with collaborative and experiential coursework and assignments. Additionally, there is faculty cross-teaching between *pimâcihisowin* and Child and Youth Care, creating synergy between the two programs.

As instruction shifted online, faculty and students in these programs shared an acute awareness that a sizable number of students no longer had the means to fully participate in online classrooms and coursework. They also brought these concerns into conversations with their subject librarian. One of the biggest challenges was access to reliable and consistent technology to complete assignments, attend online lectures, and to develop their researching skills. While these challenges existed prior to the pandemic, they were aggravated by isolation measures mandated by the provincial government and put in place by the university to support campus and broader community health. For some students, stable internet access was disrupted by a return home to rural communities with unreliable network coverage. Other students had to decide between basic living expenses and technology tools, or between personal and work obligations and extraordinary efforts to access campus and/or public technology

tools as required for academic success. Sharing these experiences with their librarian, the faculty and students were looking for solutions, possibly through the library’s technology loans. Similar to other libraries, such as the University of Alabama (Decker, 2021), MacEwan Library and campus partners worked during the pandemic to create term loans for laptops and wifi sticks. However, it was clear that this was not enough: these students needed ongoing, stable access to computers and connectivity.

Laptop bursary pilot winter 2022

In response to the program feedback, MacEwan Library successfully submitted a proposal to the Student Technology Fee Fund, and in partnership with Technology Support and the Office of Financial Aid, piloted a laptop bursary in Winter 2022. In line with other bursaries at the university, a financial need threshold was set. The bursary pilot was also limited to students enrolled in either *pimâcihisowin* or Child and Youth Care in Winter 2022 (184 students in total). Faculty and staff connected to the two programs and their subject librarian worked together to advertise the pilot and extensively assist interested students with their bursary applications.

Of twenty-four applications, twenty met the bursary criteria. One student had managed to secure a device elsewhere, and so nineteen students were ultimately awarded a brand-new laptop and offered access to paid internet for a year via wifi sticks. Based on anecdotal student and faculty feedback collected via survey and in-person conversations, common reported impacts of receiving a laptop were:

- An increased sense of investment by the university in the students and their programs
- An increased sense of belonging by students
- A sense of relief from access and technology issues that were causing financial and relational stress and hindering academic focus and engagement
- An increased sense of confidence in launching careers and pursuing further study opportunities.

With respect to receipt of laptops, the majority were picked up by students within 48 hours of

notification. However, a few laptops were picked up late in term, weeks after their awarding. This served as a reminder of the complexity of individual circumstances. Obstacles exist for students, and they exist despite best intentions and efforts. Possible reasons that emerged through stakeholder conversations included mixed feelings around receipt of a device; an unfamiliar pick-up space; as well as timing and convenience factors. Having worked with these students on their initial applications, however, the subject librarian encouraged and facilitated the pick-ups.

Expansion to university wide laptop bursary distribution fall 2022

After the success of the pilot, the laptop bursary was increased with the help of additional funds from the student technology fee and from the Office of the Provost project fund. A total of 101 laptops were purchased, and the bursary was opened to all students at MacEwan University in Fall 2022. The financial aid office at MacEwan University regularly receives 600-800 bursary applications per academic year. A total of 619 applications to the laptop bursary were received, and of these, 491 met the bursary criteria. The method of awarding was the same as the pilot wherein students with the greatest demonstrated financial need received the bursary. All 101 laptops were awarded.

Similar themes emerged in faculty and student feedback across both deliveries of the laptop bursary. The expansion of the program, however, resulted in additional anecdotal feedback from university staff. In particular, staff in the library, makerspace, writing center, and access and disability services shared feedback not only about student technology needs amongst the students they support, but also of student excitement upon being told about the bursary. Moreover, library staff – coping with waves of student requests for laptops during periods where all short and long-term laptops were in use – were happy to be able to direct students to apply for the bursary.

The expansion of the program led to a fairly even distribution of laptops to students across all university programs. In the process, however, the

number of laptop recipients enrolled in pimâcihisowin and CYCW dropped. Under the current iteration of the bursary, successful students not only had to meet the general financial threshold for bursaries at MacEwan University, but also had to be within the 101 spots assessed as being in most financial need. While analysis of the financial assessment process determining these spots is beyond the scope of this article, it should be acknowledged that a brief snapshot of an individual's financial circumstances at the time of application can miss important context around equity and accessibility in the postsecondary environment. Additionally, there is no guarantee of the students most in need applying for the bursary. The complexity and invasiveness of applying for bursaries in general is a sizable investment in time, in effort, and in emotions for students and their helpers. Such concerns were shared by applicants, and echoed by helpers at kihêw waciston, the Indigenous Student Center at the university. Finally, the application process itself required stable access to the very technology tools being sought in the first place.

Ultimately, the laptop bursary initiative put Student Technology Fees back into the hands of students who need it most to support their academic success. It is a novel way to welcome our first generation, low income, and/or minority students into post-secondary life. If continued, this bursary can be an important piece in promoting equity and diversity at MacEwan University. Future consideration will also be given to reserving a percentage of the laptops for Indigenous students in particular.

Technology access and equity in post-secondary

Koch (2022) speaks to a complex digital divide in Canada that exists not only in rural areas and in Indigenous communities, but in urban settings as well—typically the site for postsecondary institutions. She notes a role for all levels of government in addressing this, and also points to stakeholders such as education ministries and institutions as mechanisms for change (2022, p. 96). To date, however, there are limited options for stable device access and connectivity for

students through their postsecondary institutions in Canada.

With respect to student devices, the Canadian post-secondary context is markedly different than the American one. In the United States (US), there are several programs that support the provision of devices to all incoming students at many participating universities (Miller, 2022). An example is the Wireless Mobile Computing Initiative, launched in 2004, through which, Dakota State University offers a free device to every first-year student (Dakota State University, 2020). In Canada, however, it is rare for such broad technology initiatives to be in place at postsecondary institutions. We conducted a canvas of Canadian university, college and technical institute websites in Fall 2022 and did not find evidence of any programs currently providing laptops.

In Canada, it is more common for laptop specifications or requirements to be stated in general or for specific programs (e.g. University of Calgary³, MacEwan University⁴, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology⁵ (SAIT), and University of Toronto⁶). Several retailers and technology companies offer education discounts on laptops (e.g. Best Buy⁷, Apple⁸ and Lenovo⁹), and sometimes students have access to technology discounts from campus bookstores (e.g. University of Lethbridge¹⁰). University of British Columbia¹¹ also offers laptop and internet discounts to remote students. However, for the most part, students are expected to come into their studies with reliable technology that meets specified or unspoken expectations around coursework needs. Similar to peer institutions, MacEwan University has no broad technology provision program in

place. It appears that MacEwan University is unique in its creation of an in-kind technology bursary, for we have not found a similar bursary presently offered by another Canadian university.

There are real consequences for academic achievement when students cannot obtain and maintain technology. Building on previous literature, Gonzales et al. (2020) surveyed 748 undergraduate students and conducted three focus groups at a midwestern university to explore connections between access to technology and benefits for student academic achievement along with connections between the lack of sustained technology access and student grades. Students shared how technology and connectivity issues have resulted in them missing important information about assignments; have required them to seek out assignment extensions; and have left them unable to submit assignments altogether in some cases. Key findings were that students of lower socioeconomic position disproportionately experienced problems with maintaining access to technology, software, and connectivity, and that even when adjusting for socioeconomic and other factors, students with “more poorly functioning laptops and laptops that broke down more often also had lower GPAs” (p. 760).

Reisdorf et al. (2020) suggested that universities should identify and remedy non-ownership of devices as early as possible to prevent predictable student achievement difficulties. They noted that in addition to device ownership, device maintenance affects student achievement, too, and this challenge to ensure the working conditions of devices across a program of study warrants further investigation. Adding in the risk of cumulative deficits with digital literacies, which can further disadvantage student academic achievement as they go along in their studies (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019), it is advisable that postsecondary institutions adopt interventions addressing device ownership, maintenance, and utilization (Reisdorf et al., 2020). Toward addressing the pitfalls of maintenance, MacEwan University’s Laptop Bursary provides a warranty that students can access through the laptop vendor, and university technology support helps recipients with setting up the laptop, installing software, and connecting on campus.

³<https://sapl.ucalgary.ca/current-students/resources/laptop-software>

⁴<https://calendar.macewan.ca/programs/degree-programs/bdes-design/>

⁵<https://www.sait.ca/student-life/technical-support-and-resources/computers-and-laptops>

⁶<https://www.daniels.utoronto.ca/laptop-requirements>

⁷https://www.bestbuy.ca/en-ca/about/best-buy-education-post-secondary/blt280ba7d14447e980?icmp=ipp_bbb_landing_industry_educationpost_secondary&cmp=knc-c-7170000069730544-k-43700074363830695&gclid=Cj0KQcQIA-oqdBhDfARIsAO0TrGF5kWRUhdEYzr4stXMT6LxoNRUuWJ6lhdLfpOrTyp1xxKbEn_e4saAq5qEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds

⁸https://www.apple.com/ca_edu_93120/store

⁹<https://www.lenovo.com/ca/en/d/deals/student/?IPromotID=LEN541668&tabkey=Student%20Deals>

¹⁰<https://www.dentistry.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/2019-05/StudentLaptopProgramInfoSheet2019.pdf>

¹¹<https://it.ubc.ca/top-services-students/student-discounts-remote-learning>

Shank and Cotten (2014) found that youth development of self and academic efficacy were positively associated with variables including daily access to a computer, the amount of time spent using it, and the activities students engaged in while using the computers. When considering what is most advantageous for students in terms of ownership versus borrowing a library laptop, there are some notable tradeoffs that may adversely affect these specified variables. For ownership, students are responsible for maintenance, such as repairs and upgrades, and this comes with costs and challenges (Gonzales et al., 2020; Arch & Gilman, 2019). Still, ownership of a functioning laptop does create the condition of consistent individual access, which, in turn, creates circumstances where students can engage in the activities required to develop digital literacy and fully participate in their academics. Borrowing a library laptop, on the other hand, offloads maintenance to the lender but comes with a deadline after which access is no longer assured. Additionally, lenders may mandate deep freeze software onto loaner laptops that complicate student efforts to download and use software outside of the standard institutional image. This limits the likelihood of students developing certain digital literacy skills.

Perceptions of value, library scope, and positioning

The critical connection between libraries and access is clearly stated in the American Library Association's statement of core values of librarianship, such that information should be "equitably accessible to all library users" (2019). The importance of the role that technology plays in the modern library's commitment to providing access to information as part of global sustainability is also well-represented by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA) report, *Access and Opportunity for All: How libraries contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda*. This 2016 report states, "... increasing access to information and knowledge across society, assisted by the availability of information and communications

technologies (ICTs), supports sustainable development and improves people's lives" (p.1).

The value libraries place on providing laptops to students is evidenced by the many academic libraries that have established laptop lending programs. The proliferation of these programs recognizes the importance of addressing this first hurdle of the digital divide. However, it is possible that libraries have become complacent, seeing the provision of technology as sufficient in itself and thus shifting focus to what has been characterized as a second level of the divide, digital literacy (Cohron, 2015; Rowsell et al., 2017). Goedhart et al. (2019), discussing their focus on lower socioeconomically positioned mothers within a large-scale study of the digital divide in the Netherlands, caution that it can be tempting to think that access to devices is a solved issue in well off countries when in fact it is clearly still a "substantive" issue for lower socioeconomic and intersectional populations (p. 2360). Foster et al. (2022) note that in addition to laptop lending programs, there is a need for longer-term strategic investments and solutions for the "seemingly endless" demand (p. 102). It is possible that the additional challenges presented by the pandemic have provided impetus for academic libraries to recommit to creatively addressing this initial hurdle, so crucial to access, which is disproportionately affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

It may seem self-evident to library workers that providing laptops to students is an extension of the library's mission to support academic work and build their confidence in navigating today's world of information. Growing the laptop bursary has recently been identified as a goal for MacEwan University Library in recent planning discussions. As part of student-centered care, providing technology to bridge the digital divide is part of our commitment to removing access barriers to library services and resources. However, even within libraries, it may be that once resources are available on the internet, with proper accessibility features, they are considered accessible. Are they really, however? If a student does not have access to the internet, or if their device is inoperative within the library's digital domain, and they cannot enter our physical

library because we are closed due to pandemic or other physical restrictions, do they have access to our collections and resources? Today, does an academic library's responsibility for providing access to information extend to ensuring that students have the minimum devices and internet access to connect?

We see this work as an extension of our library's commitment to providing access, supporting academic work, and improving equity. It is important to note, however, that this answer does not completely address the questions of whose responsibility it is—at an academic institution—to ensure that students have laptops. Similar to questions about financial need assessment, this question is beyond the scope of the article. Rather, we consider some perceptions of how the laptop bursary initiative fits with library work and its value at the broader institution level.

Outside of the library, the rationale for why this is library work may be less clear to faculty. Some faculty, like those in the *pimâcihisowin* and Child and Youth Care programs, for example, saw a clear connection. However, we did field questions from a faculty member who, upon observing the stacks of laptops stored in a librarian's office, wondered why obtaining laptops for students would fall to a librarian? Student feedback upon receiving the laptops indicated that what might seem like a transactional service—the provision of a laptop to a student—has larger consequences. Receiving a laptop can impact critical components of student success, such as a sense of belonging and self-actualization (Shank & Cotten, 2014). These benefits may not be as readily associated with meeting these basic technological needs. Having reliable technology could also encourage a student to take advantage of academic and career opportunities and reap rewards they might not otherwise have been able to. One bursary recipient in their final year of studies noted in their feedback an increase confidence in their ability to pursue diverse employment options. Owning a laptop, they felt, put them in a better position to explore work opportunities in the nonprofit sector where employees may not always be able to rely on employer-supplied technology.

The library's creation of this bursary received significant support at MacEwan University beyond the partners that were directly involved with making the bursary happen. The Office of Communications and Marketing helped prepare materials to promote applications across campus. The Provost's Office not only contributed funds, but also supported advertisement and uptake of the bursary through a newsletter article. This is akin to support by the Provost's Office for other more obviously academic library initiatives, such as a library-led grant for faculty to develop Open Educational Resources. The Laptop Bursary was praised as an innovative way to leverage existing funds and processes to provide support to students and work toward equity.

MacEwan University Library is situated as both an academic and a service department, this was crucial to arranging this nonstandard bursary program. Bridging academics and administration, librarians and the Dean of the Library had the established relationships needed to work with administrative departments (e.g., Information & Technology, Registrar, Financial Aid) as well as academic departments and the Provost's office. This was instrumental in securing funding, ordering the laptops, getting board approval, advertising, and administering the bursary.

Challenges and opportunities

When discussing the value of this initiative to the university, we continue to seek sustainable funding to maintain and expand the bursary. The Student Technology Fee Fund is in high demand and not intended to provide ongoing funding. We have been able to find internal funding to maintain the bursary for the 23/24 academic year. As for expansion, the library has been working with members of the university's fund development team to approach potential donors and partners for this project. We are actively trying to secure ongoing internal and external funding and/or in-kind donations to maintain the bursary and hopefully expand it.

Even if the program continues, expanded or not, it cannot meet all the demands at our institution in the same ways as a program that distributes a device to every first-year student. Nonetheless, its existence is an important,

tangible starting place for improving equity and diversity, helping students in need, and relieving stress on the library's laptop and tablet loaning system. Should the laptop bursary disappear, its loss would be felt across the campus and very likely beyond as we know laptops are often shared.

Despite the discouraging possibility that this program may not have longevity, the initiative has opened some doors. A stronger relationship and pathways have been formed between the library and the Financial Aid Office for offering in-kind bursaries. There is increased recognition of and excitement for the possibilities inherent in the relationships and collaborations between subject librarians and programs/departments. Another program in the Faculty of Health and Community Studies, which houses Child and Youth Care, is considering a laptop bursary specific for students participating in their distance program. Additionally, early-stage conversations on campus are starting around support for parents struggling with childcare needs, and whether a bursary or other partnerships could provide some relief. These are some of the hopeful shoots to have grown out of the creative use of existing resources and cross-department collaboration, led by the library and its people, to meet students' needs.

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