Clark computer help desk at your service

College class provides experience to students, free assistance to public

By LAURA MCVICKER
Columbia staff writer

They heal viruses. They exterminate bugs. They even clean Windows.

These quintessential Mr. and Mrs. fix-it can tackle anything, as long as you give them a few hours, a short list of symptoms—and your computer.

William Hafer's students answer calls for Clark College's computer help desk, a free but little-known public service through the college's Microcomputer Support Specialists program.

The help desk gives students experience before they start internships and full-time jobs. It's treated as a class, with students accumulating credits by the number of hours worked; they are expected to put in at least three hours a week.

"They treat it like a job," said Hafer, an instructor with the college's computer technology department.

The help desk is actually a room in Clark College's Building A4. It's a crowded space filled with keyboards, monitors, computer manuals and, occasionally, empty pizza boxes.

Seven students staffed the desk during winter quarter, responding to some 1300 calls for help from callers seeking mostly to walk-ins. The desk is closed for spring break but will open again April 6 with a new staff and set of hours.

A decade ago, students handled task-oriented questions about floppy disk errors and how to use e-mail and spreadsheets. Now, the majority of the public's questions deal with computer viruses.

HELP DESK, 4th floor

CLARK COLLEGE COMMUNITY COMPUTER HELP DESK
Services: Computer support.
Cost: Free.
Open to: Anyone in Clark County.
Phone: 360-992-2562.
Office: Clark College's Building A4, Room 120.
Hours: Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm; closed for holidays.

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Help desk:

People often come with these questions:

"Why is my computer running slow?"

"Why can't I find a document?"

"Wasn't my computer restarted?"

To pinpoint the problem and fix it, students usually perform a scan on the computer.

Viruses can be quickly remedied by free software programs available over the Internet, such as AVG Free Anti-virus or avast! Viruses are also the easiest issues to prevent, but many novice computer users purchase and start using programs without installing anti-virus software first, Hafer said.

"One thing we do is try to educate the public as to why this is happening and how to prevent it in the future," he said.

Occasionally, students come across eyebrow-raising glitches. Earlier this month, one student found 1,127 viruses on a computer. The only symptoms: It was running slow.

"Every time you see a new machine, it's something different," said student John Wallway.

Students have access to a variety of technical service manuals that sometimes offer a clue. Finally, if they're stumped, they can refer the computer user to a professional.

A leg up

The help desk offers something more than just support to the public — it gives nontraditional students a leg up on a new career. Jerry Hatcher, 56, decided to study for a field he believes has a future.

"I looked around and said, 'This isn't getting any better,'" Hatcher said.

"I didn't know what it would be," he said. Hatcher, who works at a heating and ventilation warehouse, decided to study computer support.

"This is a great way for me to retrain," he said.

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College computer help desks are there to provide assistance to students. This is a great way for students to retrain, get a job, or even start a new career. At the Clark Computer Support Center, students can receive help with a variety of issues, including software problems, network issues, and hardware failures. The center offers assistance to students during regular hours and is staffed by knowledgeable technicians. If you're struggling with a computer issue, the help desk is there to help you get back on track.