



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Student John Wallway runs a diagnostic test on a computer while working at Clark College's computer help desk. The most common glitch that Wallway encounters are viruses. The help desk is staffed by students in Clark's Microcomputer Support Specialists program.

Clark computer help desk at your service

College class provides experience to students, free assistance to public

By LAURA McVICKER
Columbian staff writer

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

These quintessential Mr. and Ms. fix-its 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 AA4. 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 pleas for help from callers but 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.

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 AA4, Room 110.
- **Hours:** Daytime hours vary but usually Mondays through Fridays. Closed for spring break but will reopen April 6.

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Help desk:

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People often come with these questions:

“Why is my computer running slow?”

“Why can't I find a document?”

“Why won't my computer restart?”

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.

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INSTRUCTOR WITH CLARK COLLEGE'S COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY DEPARTMENT

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 symptom? 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 took the course this winter as a way to prepare himself for a profession in computer support.

Laid off from his job last spring at a heating ventilation warehouse, Hatcher, 56, opted for a field he believes has a future.

“I looked around and said, ‘This isn't getting any better,’” Hatcher said.

Though he's unsure what it will be, Hatcher wants to do exactly what he did on the help desk: assist people.

“This is a great way for me to re-train,” he said.

LAURA McVICKER: 360-735-4516 or laura.mcvicker@columbian.com.