UW General Access Computer Labs: Client Preferences

Karalee Woody and Nana Lowell
February, 1999

INTRODUCTION

To facilitate campus-wide access to desktop computing, the UWired program manages two general access computer labs. The 240 workstations in the UWired Commons and 157 workstations in the Computing Resource Center (CRC) are available to anyone with a University of Washington NetID. A third general access lab is planned for Mary Gates Hall, opening later this year. This lab will accomodate 180 workstations, and clients at the Commons and CRC were polled in order to obtain information on desired hardware and software configurations.

METHOD

During the week between November 24 and 30, 1998, users at the Commons and CRC were asked to complete a single-page questionnaire. A total of 369 completed questionnaires were returned, of which approximately one-third (31.7%) were completed at the Commons, and two-thirds (68.3%) at the CRC.

- The largest proportion of respondents were juniors or seniors (Figure 1).

- Most were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences (Figure 2).

- These proportions did not differ significantly for the Commons versus the CRC.

FINDINGS

Responses were compared by lab and by academic major of respondent, and have been summarized below on a modified version of the questionnaire. Frequencies of response are given for each item and are broken out by lab or academic major in those cases for which a significant difference was found (*chi-square<.05*).

Client Responses

Lab usage

- About half of the clients spent fewer than 3 hours each week in the Commons or CRC, but one-fifth spent 7 or more hours (Figure 3).

- Usage patterns were somewhat different for the two labs because of their hours of operation.

- Nearly all students used the labs for E-mail and more than half used them for word processing, Web access or printing. One-third used the labs to conduct library searches (Figure 4).

- Students used the Commons and CRC equally often for E-mail (92%) and library searches (37%), but all other levels of use were higher at the Commons than the CRC.

- The highest use of spreadsheets was among students enrolled in Engineering (32%), Business Administration (29%) and Architecture & Urban Planning (29%). Database use was highest among Engineering students (32%).

Computer preferences

- PC's were much more frequently used than were Macintosh computers (84% vs. 16%) and were also more preferred (Figure 5).

- The level of use of PC's was higher at the Commons (92%) than at the CRC (84%).

- Preference for Macintosh computers was higher for A&S Arts (42.9%) and A&S Humanities (20%) than for other majors.

Desired hardware and media/services

- Students most wanted the addition of scanners (44%), CD-ROM burners (40%) and DVD players (21%) to the labs (Figure 6).

- The desire for headphones was higher among students who completed questionnaires at the Commons (42%) than among those responding at the CRC (29%).

- The highest number of requests for DVD players was received from Engineering (46%) and Business Administration (39%) students. Engineering students also most frequently requested CD-ROM burners (75%).

- The largest number of media/services requests were to purchase transparencies (39%), resume paper (35%) and colored paper (29%) (Figure 7).

- A&S Arts students requested 11 x 17 paper more frequently (27%) than did other majors.

CONCLUSIONS

Responses to the client survey provide information relevant to services at the existing Commons and CRC general access computer labs, as well as the new lab to be constructed in Mary Gates Hall.

- Because the majority of clients are upper-division or graduate students, and students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences, lab services should be targeted at these groups.

- About half of the clientele use the labs for three hours or less each week, suggesting that they do the bulk of their work elsewhere and rely on the labs for services otherwise unavailable (e.g., E-mail and Internet access while on campus, or printing). As more students purchase their own computers, the need for general access labs will increase, rather than decrease.

- Students want access to computers that can be used to accomplish multiple tasks simultaneously (e.g., E-mail, word processing, web browsing/development, printing and library searches).

- The ratio of PC to Mac users is higher than expected, and suggests purchasing more PC's for the new Mary Gates lab than originally planned.

- Scanners and headphones should definitely be included in Mary Gates planning, and students seem to want a way to save their data on media holding more than a zip disk.

- Many students did not specify desired hardware and most of those who did were enrolled in Engineering or Business Administration. Their responses may reflect the future needs of students enrolled in Arts & Sciences, but this should be verified with another survey next fall when the time approaches to purchase equipment for the Mary Gates lab.

- Responses confirmed student need for media services (esp. transparencies) which are currently, and will continue to be, offered.
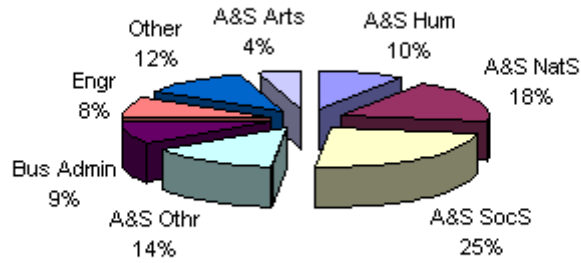
FIGURES
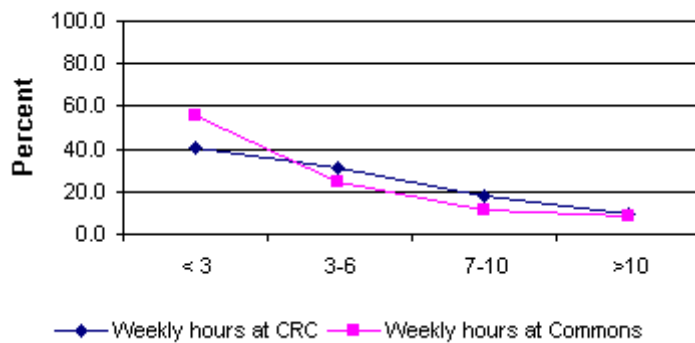
Figure 1. Class standing of respondents
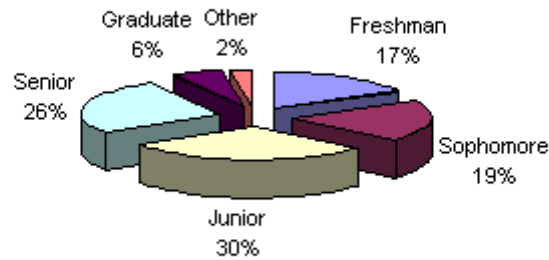
back to text
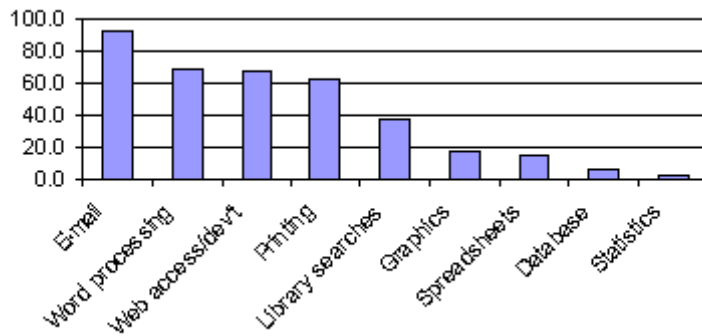
Figure 2. Academic major of respondents

back to text
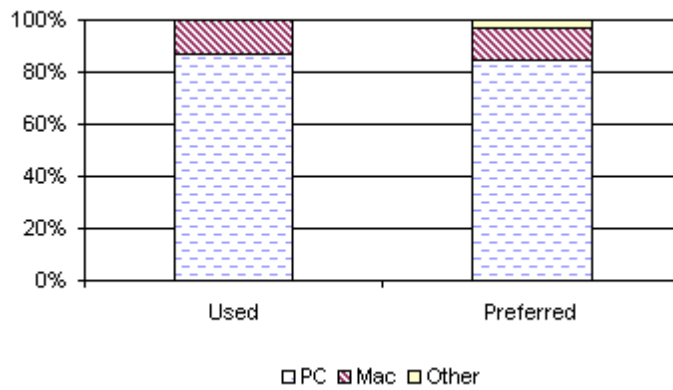
Figure 3. Number of hours per week use computer labs
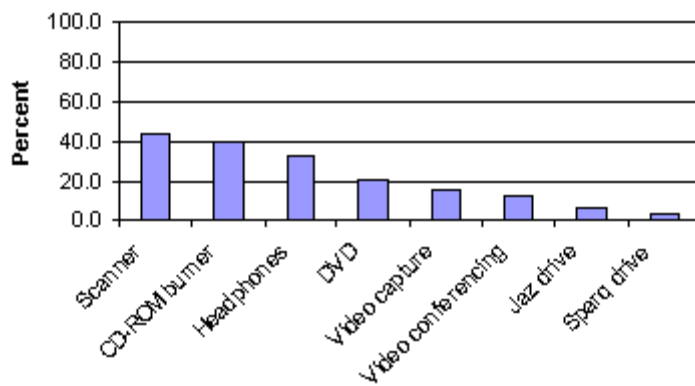

back to text

Figure 4. "I use these labs for ..."
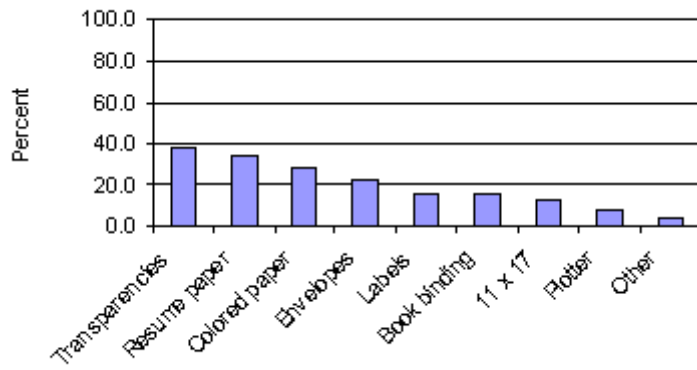

back to text

Figure 5. Computer used vs. preferred

back to text

Figure 6. Desired hardware

back to text

Figure 7. Desired media / services

back to text