Similar to many academic libraries, the Gee Library on the campus of Texas A&M University–Commerce faces increasing expectations of convenient technology to meet the needs of a growing student population.

Identifying the Need
Our main library contains an information commons that serves as the premier computer lab for the campus. The lab is heavily used, and there is often a waiting line during busy times of the semester. We continued to add desktop stations to the lab, but we still could not keep up with the demand. In addition, students working collaboratively in the lab created distractions for those who were trying to concentrate on taking tests or working on assignments.

As many other libraries have done, we began to offer laptops for checkout. They were very popular, and there was often a waiting list for them. Due to high demand, the laptops could only be kept for 4 hours, and the students were not allowed to take them out of the library.

Even with both the computer lab and laptops, we realized that we were not meeting the needs of all students. On campus, students could more easily make use of the technology, but our university has a significant population of nontraditional students and commuter students. The nontraditional students who have employment and parental responsibilities are unable to spend long hours in the library, so they could not benefit from either desktop or laptop loan services.

Exploring Solutions
We began to search for innovative and convenient ways to provide more accessibility to computers. The information commons manager saw an advertisement for a laptop-dispensing kiosk and became intrigued. The kiosk provided the opportunity to expand our number of laptops, while offering the convenience of unmediated self-checkout and check-in. A laptop kiosk operates similarly to a video rental kiosk. The customer interacts with a terminal, providing authentication and selecting the product, which is ejected from the machine and returned to an empty slot in the same machine at a later time. The owner of the machine

LaptopsAnytime: Meeting Students’ Needs for Equipment Loans Through Self-Serve Kiosks
by Gail Johnston
can set user permissions, determine the authentication method and loan periods, and interact with an ILS. When the computer is returned to the kiosk, software inside the machine authenticates the user and tracks how long the device was checked out. The kiosk wipes the computer’s memory and charges the battery for the next checkout.

**Implementing the Solution**
After researching companies and options, we decided to go with the market leader, LaptopsAnytime. When we began our pilot project in fall 2013, we were the first library in Texas to install a kiosk. We began with one kiosk with 12 slots and 12 laptops. We quickly needed to purchase 12 more laptops to rotate in and out, as the kiosk was almost always completely empty. Since the laptops take only 15 minutes to recharge, turnaround is quick. Despite this, there are still times when no laptops are available. Students often use creative tactics to be sure they will get the next available one.

As students requested, kiosk laptops can be checked out for a day. Regardless of the time of checkout, the laptop is due the next day by midnight. In addition, students can take the computers outside the library.

The kiosks are able to dispense any type of device. We chose to use laptops. Each type of device requires a different kind of rails, which slide it in and out of the machine.

On our campus, we are required to work closely with the IT department to select devices that it supports. LaptopsAnytime representatives worked with us to build our kiosks to our specifications. Once the kiosk was up and running, the operations were intuitive. With communication and support, our knowledgeable technology manager experienced no great learning curve.

**Supporting Success**
Since the kiosk located in the library was so popular, we investigated other locations on campus to place one. We determined that the best spot was the student center. It is centrally positioned on campus and is in a high-traffic area. In addition, it is close to the dorms. In fall 2014, we installed a kiosk of 12 slots and 12 laptops. Again, we had to add 12 more laptops to rotate in and out, as the machine emptied quickly. The beauty of the LaptopsAnytime product is that it can be managed remotely. The information commons manager can see when the laptops in the student center are getting low and take more over to refill the machine.

When we built the kiosk for the student center, the IT department required that we use a different type of laptop. The rails had to be different from our first kiosk. As a result, students had to return the laptop to the machine they used to check it out. This caused a bit of inconvenience, but the students soon adjusted.
Due to increasing student demand, we added a companion kiosk to the original one in the library in fall 2014. As expected, campus IT required that we use yet another type of laptop. The companion required different rails from earlier kiosks. As a result, students have one more specific place to return their laptops.

**Considerations**

If you are contemplating a kiosk implementation in your library, there are several things you should consider. First, of course, is the price. Many libraries are unable to avail themselves of this service due to a significant startup cost. Our original machine, with the kiosk, rails, and 4-year service agreement, cost approximately $30,000. This did not include the price of the laptops. We are fortunate that we have access to discretionary funds every year. These funds were used to pay for the original installation and additional kiosks and laptops.

Financial considerations should include not only startup costs, but also ongoing costs. While not as significant as those for the original installation, ongoing costs are not negligible. Libraries should plan on a replacement cycle of devices approximately every 3 years. By this time, the laptops and batteries will have been exhausted and need to be replaced.

In addition, it is advisable to maintain a service agreement. Although the kiosks are reliable, we have had a few problems. When we encounter them, LaptopsAnytime representatives are responsive and knowledgeable. With our service agreement, service calls are not charged.

Another consideration is where to put the kiosk. It should be placed in a secure, manageable location. In our library, it is situated in the information commons near the customer service desk. The kiosk in the student center is in a high-traffic area, so misuse of the service is unlikely. In addition, our kiosks are located in sight of campus security cameras, and each kiosk has a camera built in, similar to those found on ATMs. The machine should also be located where power and Ethernet lines can be installed.

Consider who your user group will be. We provide checkouts to students only. (We still check out laptops to faculty members at the customer service desk.) You also need to determine how to authenticate users. Our kiosks require students to swipe their student ID and agree to the terms of service, including responsibility for loss or damage.

Librarians often are concerned with damage and loss of the devices. Our experience shows that damage and loss percentages are comparable to those of over-the-counter checkouts. We have encountered no vandalism or other damage to the kiosks themselves.
If you decide to install an automated device-dispensing kiosk, be sure to show your innovative service to students, faculty members, and administrators. We held a launch party and invited dignitaries to see how the kiosks work. We thought it might take a while for the service to catch on, but after the demonstration, students lined up to check out a laptop. Our kickoff party is featured in a YouTube video: youtube.com/watch?v=hk_1CTA2Pgw.

**What We Learned**

Now that we are at the end of our 3-year cycle, what have we learned—and where do we go from here? One thing we know is that students are more than satisfied with the service. Usage statistics, student surveys, and LibQUAL+ comments indicate the popularity of the kiosks.

We also know that we need more kiosks and laptops and that we will probably never be able to meet the demand for technology. We are purchasing new laptops. All of the laptops will be identical, which will require new rails, but this will provide added convenience, as students can return them to any kiosk.

Let your administrators know how successful the project has been at other universities. Yes, the startup cost is significant, but how does it compare with the cost of having personnel to conduct over-the-counter checkouts? Will it cost less than adding new desktop stations?

Of course, come up with a proposal of how to pay for the project. Even though we have some discretionary funds, we try to collaborate with other campus entities. This year, we requested funding for new kiosks from the campus student services fee. What are other cost-saving measures you can take? One option to consider is using your current laptops if they are strong enough to withstand the wear and tear of intense use.

Be sure to show the campus entities that will approve the project that you have prepared thoroughly. Show them your designated location and how it will be secured and managed. If you would like to show administrators how the kiosk works, the LaptopsAnytime website is helpful. You can show them our kickoff party video. LaptopsAnytime also has a link to an introductory video on its homepage.

**Conclusion**

Now that we have completed our 3-year cycle, we are evaluating going forward with the kiosks. Was the investment worth it? Yes, it was. Was the project successful? Yes, definitely. Will we continue to add more kiosks and laptops? Yes, the demand demonstrates the need. Would we do it again? Absolutely.

*LaptopsAnytime self-service dispensing kiosks highlight the changing technology needs of libraries and communities.*