

Three state colleges require students to own laptops this fall

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BOSTON -- Three state colleges are requiring new students to own laptop computers this fall under an initiative that will spread to other schools in coming years.

The requirement applies to first-year students this fall at Bridgewater, Framingham and Worcester state colleges. The rule will be extended next fall to Salem State College and Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and then in 2006 to Westfield State and Fitchburg State.

The rule does not apply to the University of Massachusetts system, and community colleges.

The colleges have a deal with Dell Inc. to offer packages including laptops, software and warranties to students for discounted prices of around \$1,200. Some students at Bridgewater, Framingham and Worcester have received extra financial aid to help cover the cost.

"We wanted to make sure it was affordable for everybody, and wouldn't make it impossible for anyone to come," Bill Davis, vice president for information technology at Bridgewater State College and an architect of the laptop initiative, told The Boston Globe in an interview published Monday. Bridgewater expects about 1,400 full-time freshmen this fall.

State colleges, with smaller, more stable student bodies when compared to the usually larger university campuses, appeared to be the best place to start the laptop experiment, Davis said.

In 2002, fewer than 5 percent of colleges nationwide required students to buy personal computers, according to a study by the nonprofit group EDUCAUSE, which promotes technology in higher education.

The first colleges to require computers were Dartmouth College and Drexel University, 20 years ago, said Kenneth Green, who studies college technology as director of The Campus Computing Project in California. Requirements are less common at public campuses, but do exist at the University of Florida, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and some state colleges, he said.

Over the past few years, the cost of attending state college in Massachusetts has risen to nearly \$10,000 a year, including tuition, fees, room and board.

"It's not cheap; it's \$1,200 on top of tuition," said Lynn resident Sarah Thistle, who starts school at Bridgewater State next week. "I would prefer to wait and see how much I use it before I buy it. They say it's for research, but that's what the library's for."

At Bridgewater, Worcester and Framingham, wireless computing networks have been installed, so students can use their laptops anywhere on campus. At Framingham State, more than 60 faculty members have been trained to teach with laptops, and this fall, 82 courses will integrate the portable computers, with class work and homework assignments specifically designed to use the technology, said Peter Chisholm, college spokesman.

Students who choose not to buy the Dell computers can bring other laptops to campus, but desktop computers cannot be used as a substitute. Over time, Davis said, the laptop requirement will save colleges money, by ending the need to replace hundreds of public computers on campus every few years.