

YSU launches wireless computer technology



A wireless computer system now being piloted in Maag Library will be the start of a campus-wide wireless network that revolutionizes computing services at Youngstown State University.

"Wireless is simply more flexible, and flexibility is something both students and faculty want," said Donna Esterly, YSU interim chief technology officer.

"Students more and more want the ability to do their work where they are, rather than having to go to a computer lab. Faculty members want the capability to teach using laptop computers in the classroom. Wireless networks provide that."

The YSU campus, from residence halls to classrooms, has been wired for several years, allowing students, faculty and staff to access online services from the comfort of their dorm rooms or offices.

The campus, however, is not configured for wireless services, which allow access to online services from a laptop computer without connecting into a wired line.

With a wireless system, for instance, a student could access the campus network through their laptop computer while munching on a sandwich at Kilcawley Center or while relaxing in a study lounge in Moser Hall.

"It will be a significant enhancement from where we are now," Esterly said.

Mark Welton, an analyst in Network Services at YSU, said the University of Akron already has installed a campus-wide wireless network, and he said several other Northeast Ohio universities are in the process of testing their own systems.

"In five years, the majority of campuses will be wireless," he said. "It's becoming a necessity."

YSU's recently-released Master Technology Plan calls for installing wireless network access in a minimum of two campus buildings per year, said Tom Doctor, director of Network Services.

Nearly a year ago, Doctor and his staff began planning for a wireless pilot project at Maag Library to serve as a model for other building configurations.

Paul Kobulnicky, Maag executive director, said the library is a perfect place to test the system because Maag gets students, faculty and staff using computers for a wide variety of reasons, from checking e-mail to conducting extensive literature searches.

In late September, wireless access points and antennas were installed throughout the six floors of the library, and in November the university purchased 20 wireless notebook computers for the test.

The pilot project, which began this week and runs through the end of the semester, allows students, faculty and staff to "borrow" one of the state-of-the-art notebook computers and to use them anywhere in the library for up to three hours, Doctor said.

"We really encourage people to go to the library and use the wireless system," he said. "The more people who use it, the better."

Kobulnicky said users will be asked to complete evaluation sheets. "We want to know what works and what doesn't work," he said.

Welton and Doctor said the feedback is needed to assist in evaluating future wireless development across campus.

After the Maag pilot, wireless installation is likely to expand first to buildings with academic classrooms and laboratories, and then later to other areas like Kilcawley Center, Esterly said.

"We're being very selective in how we put it in," Welton said.

"Our major concern is the security of the system," Esterly said. "That's why we're moving cautiously."

The Maag pilot, including installation of the access points and purchase of the notebook computers, cost nearly \$70,000, Doctor said. Esterly said it is too early to estimate the total cost of installing wireless technology campuswide.

"If this pilot stimulates discussion about the appropriate use of wireless technology, then we'll have achieved our objective," Doctor said.