

Building a Community of Student Employees

Does any higher education IT organization not hire students? Making them full participants in the IT community yields optimal results

By **Lida Larsen**

At every turn, we hear that higher education IT units have more to do and fewer resources with which to do it. "Funding IT" remained the number one IT-related issue reported in the annual EDUCAUSE Current IT Issues Survey,¹ and no one is surprised. The economic pendulum sweeps back and forth, but rarely has the top of the sweep provided adequate resources to maintain current services, upgrade critical infrastructure, and plan for and implement new technologies. Exemplary stewardship has always required that IT leadership leverage limited resources to meet the needs of the institutional community.

Complementing the need to leverage resources is the academic community's role in providing both academic and workplace learning opportunities and financial assistance to students—who traditionally work part-time, receive lower salaries, and generate fewer overhead costs than their full-time staff counterparts. Many other benefits, besides economic ones, accrue to hiring students. Jason Brown covered a number of these in the *EQ* article "Student Employees: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?"²

It is not surprising, therefore, that IT departments have a long history of hiring students. The department, institution, students, and users benefit most from this practice when student employees are woven into the fabric of the IT community as full participants. By this I mean that they are treated as any other employee—with job descrip-



tions, performance reviews, training and professional development, and a clear path for growth and promotion. Ronald Barden suggested that "Treating student workers the same as any other university employee is a win-win situation for students and the institution" in the *EQ* article "They Are Employees, After All!"³ Of equal importance, student employees should have the opportunity to contribute their ideas and expertise to decision making in the community.

Individuals who share space, inter-

ests, and values and interact with each other build a community when they share a vision, respect each other, communicate clearly, and work as a team. The students hired do not automatically become a homogeneous group of like-minded individuals with good interpersonal skills and experience in working with others. They will need some help to get there. How can an IT department inject community building into all phases of a student employment program?

They Are All Students

All student employees are first and foremost students, no matter their status (undergraduate, graduate, nontraditional) or the job for which they were hired. According to the EDUCAUSE Core Data Service results for 2002 and 2003, about 66 percent of IT student hires support the Help Desk, Desktop and User Support, and Instructional Technology and Student Computing. The remaining 34 percent spread over 9 other categories of support.⁴ From my own observation, nearly every unit of an IT department can benefit from adding students to the staff. Tech-savvy consultants can provide network infrastructure support. Programmers and Web developers can support a variety of short- and medium-term projects. Technical writers help develop documentation and training materials and assist the communications office with public relations and marketing collateral. General office, data entry, and financial processing skills are needed by the administrative units. A graphic artist can support the work of multiple units.

Some of these roles might be complex enough to require more seasoned skills than the traditional undergraduate pool can supply. Fortunately, many IT departments have a wealth of expertise and energy available from graduate and nontraditional students who have the necessary experience and skills. Adding graduate and nontraditional students to a work group also adds a natural layer of mentors and role models for undergraduates. Graduate library science students, for example, can be exemplary employees in Web development because they understand information, information architecture, and technology and are service-oriented. They might also bring teamwork experience and workplace skills. And, they can be natural allies in efforts to build community.

Finding Funding

IT departments can find many ways to leverage limited funds through the judicious use of work study, cooperative agreements, graduate assistantships, and internships. Understandably, though, most student hires will be funded from

the general IT budget. Other funding sources may have special circumstances. Funding from a student technology fee, for example, might be limited to specific student services. Work-study programs provide federal funds for salaries only. Students qualify for a certain amount of funding, and when that funding has been spent, alternate funds must be found to keep them on the payroll. Many colleges and universities provide a percentage of graduate assistantships for non-teaching/non-research positions and make them available to service units across the campus.

Another option provides an internship where the student earns academic credit for IT work or is paid a salary. Cooperative agreements and other creative funding options depend on the specific situation. They are almost always based on collaboration and pooled resources, and, typically, they require more of a manager's time than other positions.

Once an IT department has secured funding, the position must be approved. Then the manager can recruit and interview potential student hires.

Hiring

Though some of the paperwork and time needed to hire a student employee might seem onerous, a good hiring process clearly specifies the job's duties and the skills and experience necessary to succeed in the position. It also clarifies the manager's responsibilities for supporting the position. Just as for a full-time hire, consider the justification, funding source, position description and qualifications, reporting structure, hours and duration of work, salary ranges and promotion paths, work environment (facilities and equipment), opportunities for professional growth, and recruitment plan. Prospective student employees have the same considerations, although from their own perspective.

Compensation and promotion opportunities for student employees must be equitable across the department and support professional development. Many rewards are possible besides a paycheck. In my experience, the most

important reward is learning to work in a team environment with seasoned IT professionals. Close behind is the technical experience gained, enabling student employees to add knowledge and experience to a résumé.

The recruitment process provides the first opportunity for community building. The interview is a two-way communication for developing basic expectations between the manager and the prospective employee. Active listening always helps to confirm expectations of the position and qualifications. Allow plenty of time to respond to the candidate's questions. Provide a tour of the work environment. Introduce other team members and describe their roles in the group and how the candidate will fit into the group if selected for the position. Make the position's role in the group a focus throughout the recruitment process.

Policies and Guidelines

Once hired, students can be integrated into the fabric of the existing unit or, if this is a new venture, transformed into a community that works as a team and cares about the work to be done. To help them do this, student employees need a framework that describes their relationships within the work community. The institution's policies and guidelines for student employment should be posted online for hiring managers and student employees to reference. Items may include requirements for various job descriptions, grievance procedures, ethical conduct guidelines, and a definition of appropriate work, including skill expectation levels and maximum weekly time commitments.

Departmental policies and guidelines should drill deeper into the relationships with student employees, perhaps outlining hiring, administrative, and related procedures. They may specify frequency of performance appraisals and policies for frequency and levels of pay raises. They may mandate customer service, diversity, or other on-the-job training and orientations for new hires. Additional guidelines might concern communication procedures, channels of authority, time and atten-

dance, technical training, logical consequences for poor performance or inappropriate behavior, and, for some units, dress standards.

Students might find such policies and guidelines bureaucratic or otherwise inhibiting to their creativity. Consider using positive statements instead of negative ones. If the item could seem arbitrary to a student, indicate the value that supports it. Few people want to work where the guidelines are all about what one can't do or seem unconnected to the job.

Guidelines and policies can go into a student employee handbook that addresses other elements of the work community. Office supplies, microwave and refrigerator rights, personal storage space, earphones and speakers, tips for getting along with others, and procedures to resolve conflict are just a few issues to include. The handbook can reference institutional and departmental policies and guidelines wherever applicable.

Most student employees will welcome the opportunity to review and comment on handbooks. Schedule time with student staff, at least once a year, to review and update the handbook. They may volunteer to craft new sections or propose revisions to an existing one. A blog might complement the static handbook.

A Common Vision and Shared Goals

A sense of community is fostered by a common vision and shared goals. Communicate the mission, vision, and goals of both the department and the unit within which the student will work. It is also important to communicate, on a regular basis, how current and planned projects align with those statements. Find mechanisms for student employees to share in setting the unit's mission and goals and thereby contribute to planning their work.

Knowing how the unit and the individual's work fit into the overall picture helps student employees understand the larger community and their role within it. That, in turn, can foster an appreciation for the work of other units



and for collaboration among units. Discovering shared goals is also a first step in negotiating and resolving conflict. Organizational charts might help, but more important is understanding how the work of each unit provides an essential piece to the puzzle that, as a whole, achieves the shared goal.

Training and Professional Development

Informal on-the-job training occurs in the daily interactions between managers and staff and within work teams. It can be the most effective method of providing opportunities for applying learning to real-world work. While individual professional development opportunities such as off-campus technical training programs and conferences generally prove unaffordable for student employees, in-house training through making reference material available, offering online training programs, and collaborating with other groups for on-site training can be cost-effective. Many institutions have developed strong training programs for their student employees, as documented in EDUCAUSE publications and on its Web site. "Opportunity Knocks!" by Cynthia Golden provides a good overview.⁵

Cross-training is relatively inex-

pensive and has the added benefit of developing appreciation for the work of others while learning new skills. Cross-training, particularly at smaller institutions, is also a matter of survival when members of a small staff must cover for one another. Logistically, it can be more difficult at larger institutions, potentially involving multiple units. If so, cross-training could apply to a few students in specific situations who would benefit the most from the opportunity.

A different kind of training can help build community: orientations. Orientations acquaint new hires with the resources and opportunities available to them. These may be informal in nature, but more formal, department-wide orientations provide a common base of skills and understanding for all student employees. Whether annual or once a term, half-day or full-day, department-wide orientations can help build community across unit lines and cover cross-unit topics. Department-wide orientations are a good time to bring in outside presenters for interpersonal skill building such as diversity training, customer service, conflict resolution, time management, and more. Other topics might include departmental updates on new systems, staff, resources, or policies.

Because scheduling around classes can be frustrating, department-wide orientations could be held just prior to each term or offered more than once.

Empowerment

Feeling empowered to do a task gives student employees a sense of reward. It can be an important element in making them feel like full members of the work community. After they have completed the initial training and orientation, structure work so that student employees control their day-to-day tasks. This flexibility further feeds their sense of empowerment and teaches them time management.

It might sound trite, but give them work they can handle and the resources they need to do it efficiently. Set reasonable expectations and agree on the end product. Check on their progress, but allow students to manage the assignment themselves. Allow them to learn from their mistakes—how to regroup, seek assistance if needed, and try again. The ability to admit partial or full failure and seek assistance when needed is a life skill. The ability to develop it within a trusted community strengthens the community as well as the individual.

Student employees feel empowered by inclusion in regular staff meetings. These meetings might be the unit's most important communication mechanism, where staff share valuable information and make decisions affecting the unit and its members. Student employees can bring new and fresh ways of thinking because they are less encumbered by mindsets of earlier decades. "Thinking out of the box" is easier if one has not been "in the box" for long. Student employees might provide that needed antidote to the entrenched mindset revealed by "But we've always done it this way!" Thinking out of the box is, of course, different from thinking without knowledge and experience. A good manager will listen to both contributions and affirm the positive attributes from each.

Affirmation

Understanding mission and developing an appreciation for co-workers creates an environment of affirmation. Value the diversity of the talents and

skills of student employees. Point out the roles of individuals' skills in the work group and how they complement each other. The group's value will rise with the value each individual brings to it, making opportunities for teamwork and collaboration more appealing.

When the unit, or an individual, receives positive comments from elsewhere, especially from above, make sure everyone in the unit knows and understands why approval was tendered. Likewise, graciously accept positive comments on behalf of everyone in the unit and highlight individuals who made strong contributions to the project, service, or situation.


Affirming your clients can also help set a positive tone in the work environment. An affirmed client becomes a partner rather than someone for whom we do things.

You can't legislate communication habits of positive affirmation, but you can model them for your staff. Discourage complainers by recognizing that problems are challenges to stretch understanding, knowledge, and capacity. Affirmation is more than giving positive performance feedback, though that can be a part of it. Neither is it cheerleading. Affirmation is a form of mentoring—a primary task for those who supervise or work with student employees.

Fun and Food

Most student employment programs provide social opportunities for fun and group building. Students are invited to holiday parties, awards events, and employee appreciation lunches, as well as informal events to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and retirements. Getting away from the office as a group can benefit everyone, whether going across campus for ice cream, across town to get group rates for the latest popular film, or to a chili cook-off at someone's home. I am rather fond of the "serve food and they will come" philosophy and have used it extensively as an incentive or reward. In general, food matters—a lot—to students. A colleague swears her brownies are a key ingredient in the success of her student employment pro-

gram. Home-made brownies are always appreciated, but pizza delivery works just as well. For students, particularly commuters, the workplace can become an on-campus home where they celebrate milestones, develop friendships, and form lasting memories of their college experience.

Student employees will always be students first and employees second. There are limits to what and how much they can do as employees. You might encounter problems with scheduling, technical training, oversight, and more. Their customer service and people skills might need honing. John Mrazek discussed these and other issues in "Student Workers: The Narcotic Tech Departments Can't Live Without."⁶ Managing the many aspects of a student employment program is not a task for the meek or the weary. Nonetheless, it can be a rewarding adventure for manager and students alike. 

Endnotes

1. L. Maltz, P. B. DeBlois, and the EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee, "Top-Ten IT Issues, 2005," *EDUCAUSE Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, May/June 2005, pp. 14–28, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0530.pdf>>.
2. J. Brown, "Student Employees: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?" *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003, pp. 9–11, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0331.pdf>>.
3. R. Barden, "They Are Employees, After All," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, pp. 4–5, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0420.pdf>>.
4. See the Core Data Service for 2002 and 2003, <<http://www.educause.edu/coredata>>.
5. C. Golden, "Opportunity Knocks! A Student Employment Preparation Program," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2000, pp. 60–62, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eq/a001/eqm001b.pdf>>.
6. J. Mrazek, "Student Workers: The Narcotic Tech Departments Can't Live Without," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003, pp. 5–8, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0330.pdf>>.

Lida Larsen (llarsen@educause.edu) is Professional Development Specialist at EDUCAUSE.