

Student Workers: The Narcotic Tech Departments Can't Live Without

Higher education IT departments have become addicted to overusing student workers, threatening their own health and even survival

By **John Mrazek**

Student workers are destroying our IT departments, and we aren't doing anything to save ourselves! Either we do not care because student support scratches an itch we need scratched, or we just plain can't care because there is really no other alternative—and we have a job to get done. Whatever the reasons for higher education's addiction to this pool of cheap, readily available, and mostly prepared workers, it is a dirty little secret that has the potential to slowly kill our technical departments. We seem unable to stop ourselves—or maybe we don't want to.

In the same way that crack cocaine causes addicts to make decisions that end up destroying their lives, the lure of cheap and plentiful student workers has clouded our judgment and blinded us to the negative effects that overusing them has on our staffs and on user expectations. Misuse of student workers, like misuse of any powerful drug, results in destruction instead of help and an addiction that requires hard work to overcome.

Freeing a college from the clutches of this powerful narcotic can be painful and expensive, yet it is absolutely vital. The big question is whether we have the will and tools we need to kick the habit. Are you strong enough to buck years of tradition and make some tough cultural adjustments that will save your college and the careers of your full-time technical staff? I almost wasn't, and it cost me valuable time, treasured full-time staff, and possibly some market share in our

very competitive and demanding higher education marketplace.

Falling into the Trap

Judson College fell into the trap of using student workers for all the classic reasons. Students are cheap, skilled enough for first-level support, and plentiful at the start (but not end) of every semester. They also can serve as your eyes and ears into the student population. If peer pressure is not too overwhelming, they might even help get the word out about tough issues like illegal peer-to-peer file sharing. My favorite reasons for using students are that

- students provide an excellent resource pool for future full-time staff, and
- such employment helps students gain valuable “real life” experience for when they graduate.

On the surface both of these sound like great reasons—until you try to compete with writing term papers, a new boyfriend or girlfriend, the sport that provides their scholarship, or marketplace salary levels two to three times what you can pay. Student workers will always be students first and part-time computer technicians second. If you think otherwise, then you are forgetting what your campus's real mission statement is and what your role in fulfilling it should be.

Becoming Addicted

My name is John, and my story begins with my arrival at Judson in December of 2001. Like any “newbie” I started out

the first day naïve, full of new ideas, and ready to take on the challenges that plagued my predecessors.

One of my first big surprises was the higher ed concept called the “student worker pool.” In the beginning I was excited to see lots of extra hands to help tackle the 70 to 100 workstation and networking issues that my team had to support every day. My head swam with the thought of augmenting my clearly overworked full-time staff with several low-cost student computer geeks who could also receive training in a production environment before leaving college and competing for a “real” job.

Before I realized it, I got sucked into relying on student workers who frequently ended up being flighty, unprepared, and not quite ready for the pressures of a production environment where mistakes are accepted but not appreciated. I thought the initial problems with the student staff were the results of a poorly designed selection and training program that I could fix with a new batch of hand-picked recruits the next semester. I was so wrong.

Like all new addicts I was blind to a reality apparent to the increasing number of our victims (staff, faculty, and even students) on campus. The use of student workers was slowly destroying my team's reputation and beginning to do serious damage to my full-time staff in incremental ways.

My full-time staff were having to work harder and harder revisiting user problems that were half done or made worse by the first visit of a student worker. On



top of that mess, I was adding to the velocity of their burnout by piling a long list of critical projects and required updates onto their supposedly empty plates. I foolishly thought they had plenty of free time now that student workers were handling the first-level calls they used to cover. Unknown to me, our downward spiral was accelerating. It was time to dig in and look for a way out.

Facing the Problem

I believe that student workers feed our addiction by enabling us in at least three basic areas.

- They enable us to underpay our full-time technical staff by giving us a way to meet our users' expectations with brute force instead of skilled technicians.
- They inadvertently cause our campuses to fall behind in the technology

that we need to meet the high-tech requirements of the new Gen X and Y students.

- They contribute to user expectations that can become unsupportable and lead to poor customer service ratings.

Judson college has two full-time workstation support personnel. We also have a network administrator, a Web project manager, and two application support specialists, but end-user support is the primary responsibility of the workstation support team. Two full-time people can probably cover the number of calls we get on a daily basis if that is all they do—and if we do not have to rely on them for upgrades to the workstations or other network projects. Our administration is only now beginning to realize how critical it is to have trained individuals in these roles, as the faculty and staff become more reliant on technology

to enhance the learning experience.

According to current marketplace salary trends in our area, both individuals are making between two-thirds and half a typical technician's salary. I can justify the lesser amount because of the perks of a slower pace, lower expectations, and tuition benefits. Student workers appear to help make this a reality by offloading a portion of the daily support demands, allowing a slower, easier paced environment. Without cheap student workers, I would have to pay a salary equal to the marketplace. My salary goal for staff is 70 percent of market grade, but the future doesn't look promising—marketplace salaries continue to grow, while higher ed is pretty much locked into pre-1985 salary ranges.

Student workers also keep salaries low when they stay on campus to take on full-time roles. Although there are some benefits—like the institutional knowledge they have gained and their familiarity with the faculty and staff—it is again smoke and mirrors. They help perpetuate artificially low pay scales because their salary requirements are lower, and so is their real-time experience.

There are some exceptions, of course, but for the most part technicians are not seasoned enough to make a solid impact on a campus until they have experienced the world outside of higher education. There is still no substitute for working in a production, 24 × 7, 365, IT environment.

Some colleges are business grade; some are not. Judson is working in that direction, and it is going to take awhile before we truly arrive because we lack the funding right now to be anything more than a support organization. Student workers in our environment will get some good experience and exposure to relatively cutting-edge technology. Still, they are by no means ready to perform at the levels demanded by the marketplace and should not expect a salary at that level, either.

Sometimes the statement "you do not know what you do not know" is a little too true when it comes to technology. Student workers will not be as innovative as seasoned professionals until they have seen all of the possible technologies

in action and have lived through supporting them.

The underfunding in higher ed limits our ability to pay the salaries needed to keep or attract IT professionals. I also believe that our lack of discretionary funds limits our ability to purchase the latest technologies or explore new tools like document management and electronic forms (to name a few). If our student workers are not exposed to these technologies except in class or in trade magazines, how can they know anything substantial about them? Knowing theory and applying it in a production environment are two different things. Student workers cannot help us stay current with new technology trends that customers demand if they do not know that they exist or the best practices for implementing them. And don't forget how much it costs to "purchase" the expertise from outside consulting firms so that they can train your student workers (now full-time staff) to supplement the theory they receive in classes.

Tackling Expectations

No support strategy, team structure, or philosophy has ever been able to meet 100 percent of users' demands or expectations. We still must service our customers in a way that helps them service theirs. That said, I do not think we can afford to send anything less than our best technicians when a user calls with an emergency or other support issue. Student workers are a good attempt, but probably not the best solution no matter how well trained they are before the first call.

Judson College has a student worker handbook that illustrates expectations, service-level agreements, escalation procedures, and basic troubleshooting guidelines. We also have a mentoring program with a full-time staff member overseeing a group of student workers and ensuring that they finish support issues completely and as quickly as possible. Despite all this preplanning and advanced preparation, we still hear back from the user community that they would rather have a full-time technician show up than a student worker. Is it because student workers are perceived a certain way and have acquired a less-than-stellar reputa-

tion? Or are we not preparing them well enough for the tasks they face? Either way, it only takes one influential staff or faculty member a few minutes to trash the help desk's reputation.

I would be the first to admit that we need to do a better job of training our student workers and providing careful oversight. But when do you have the time to rethink or rewrite procedure manuals, while continually having to follow-up or do damage control when a job wasn't done according to expectations? How about never?

Of course, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and I am just as committed as the next guy when it comes to preparing our students for the marketplace. But I am also realistic about what it takes to satisfy users who expect perfection and super-quick response times every time they use e-mail. To expect student workers who only put in a few hours a day to care about our reputations or about our users like we do is probably stretching it a bit. I am not trying to be too negative here, but my boss and my user community need us to do our very best every time—otherwise the college will not reach its goals, and students get cheated.

In the old days we might have been able to throw lots of hands at our user requests because the environment was lower tech and the issues did not require much more than common sense and minimal skills. Now it is a different story, with networks built on Layer 3 switches, complex routing strategies, and fiber optics carrying multiple protocols like video, voice, and wireless data streams. Operating systems are getting more complex, the audiovisual equipment in the classrooms is becoming nearly business grade, and security procedures are forcing everyone to be extra careful about when and how people get connected to the campus network. Just about the time your student workers begin to make sense of the environment, their class schedules change or a sports season starts, and you lose them to something that takes precedence over their part-time campus job.

I love the concept of preparing students through internships and exposure to supporting real users. But I do not feel

comfortable sacrificing our users' productivity or making them into guinea pigs to test our new student-worker motivational strategies and training procedures. Some college communities demonstrate a level of flexibility and grace when it comes to service levels and expectations. I wonder, though, if they would be as accommodating of the amounts of procedural change we inflict on them if given the chance to vote.

Student workers can be an effective stop gap when you have a special project requiring extra focus from the full-time staff, or they can provide extra hands for first-level support calls. I think we go too far, becoming addicted to the supposed benefits they offer. It is time to take a long, hard look at what relying on this cheap labor pool has done to our ability to service our campuses at the level they request or will need as technology continues to advance.

Coming Clean

Judson's climb out of the morass of addiction is starting very simply, with a change to a long-held philosophy. We no longer view student workers as the answer to our problems, but as a slippery slope that could threaten to destroy us again if we start relying on them too much.

This might seem like another rationalization from an addict unable to see reality. It is not. Things are starting to change at Judson, and it is getting easier to stay ahead of user issues. We still have a long way to go before the problems with our customer service and negative perceptions on campus are repaired, but the healing has begun. It is a day-to-day process that requires constant diligence and accountability. Sometimes we slip back into old patterns, but that happens less and less, and my staff are beginning to smile again and enjoy their jobs.

How did we do it? To say it was easy would be a lie—and evidence that the old sickness still controls us. Our road to healing started with a big change to a fundamental tenet that our campus has had for a long time. Our new philosophy goes like this:

"We now view student workers as temporary training candidates who are a part of the team only to gain exposure to a

nearly 'real-world environment' and who are not allowed to take on any more than a minor administrative role in projects or support calls."

That single statement has made a huge change in how we select, train, and deploy our newly reduced pool of student worker trainees. Instead of equal parts of the whole, they are now viewed as junior team members mentored by seasoned team members looking to help them become capable technicians someday. In the past we frequently viewed our student workers as part-time computer technicians able to carry the same load as full-time professional staff. That mistake has ended. Now we realize that student workers truly are

- Students first. (Imagine that!)
- College-age people enjoying their last bit of carefree fun before the adult world "ruins their lives."
- Individuals with basic computer skills but not the focus and ownership of a professional, full-time technician committed to a chosen career.

I might be slower than the rest of you, but it took these few bullet points to change my whole way of looking at the opportunity that student workers offer. Recognizing these traits of student workers stopped our downwardly spiraling addictive patterns. Has this new philosophy fixed our salary issues, aging technology problems, and the dissatisfaction of the students, faculty, and staff? Not completely. But we are on the way back up, and the feedback is getting more positive with each conversation and user survey.

Remembering to view our trainees as students first also reminded us how important and precious is our opportunity to help educate them. Tuition keeps climbing, new students keep expecting newer technologies, and the faculty keep pushing the limits on when and how much to use audio-visual tools in their lesson plans. If the IT staff is ever going to become a more active part in determining appropriate learner outcomes, it is now. Before we can do that, we need to

make sure we are meeting our core responsibilities at the highest levels, and that requires discipline and constant self-evaluation. Allowing old beliefs and stale methodologies to addict us to quick fixes—like relying on student workers too much—is a mistake that we have begun to address.

Interventions are painful and embarrassing. I have lived through one and never want it to happen again. Still, who knows what other secret addictions lurk in our technical departments that we are either too afraid to talk about or do not even recognize as problems any more. It only takes a change in perception and a determination to do whatever you must to protect your full-time staff from the harm such addictions can cause. I have conquered the addiction to student workers, and so can you. Be strong! Your campus and staff are counting on you. *e*

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