

Student Workers: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?

Judicious use of student workers can effectively supplement the full-time IT staff, including in roles the professional staff could not fill

By **Jason Brown**

In 1989, when I first joined the central IT department at Duquesne University, we employed student workers to perform a variety of tasks in support of the full-time staff. Since that time, as a department we have gone from employing one or two students per year to nearly 100. To be sure, we use student management and training programs today that are vastly different from in the past. However, student employees are no less valuable now than they were 14 years ago. If anything, we have learned to employ them in roles that no professional staff member could ever accomplish.

It is no secret that the majority of technology departments in higher education are underfunded and understaffed. It's also no secret that, first and foremost, student workers appear to be a ready supply of inexpensive labor. While this attribute is accurate, we chose to take a more enlightened view of this resource, keeping wages competitive with local sandwich shops, instituting professional development programs, and managing through reward and discipline systems that help drive up the efficiency of, and our overall satisfaction with, our student employment program.

Benefits of Student Staff

In addition to providing inexpensive labor, students present an organization with a potential host of other benefits. Allow me to share some of those benefits from my personal and professional experience.



■ *Sometimes student employees turn into full-time employees.*

I, for one, was a student employee in my former, undergraduate life. My professional career has benefited from that experience. Since working at Duquesne, I personally know of four other student staff who have gone on to become full-time staff members within our department. What better way to prepare a new employee and conduct an interview than to work with that individual for an extended period of time?

■ *Enriching a student's experience through a valuable employment opportunity furthers the mission of higher education in general.*

Duquesne University's mission is educating the hearts, minds, and souls of its students. Allowing them to give back to the university through service can be an

enriching experience and elevates students' thinking from the purely academic to the more concrete.

■ *Some students enjoy working odd hours, enabling service provision on a 24 x 7 basis.*

This is not as much of an issue as it was in the past, since many of our 24 x 7 facilities now operate in unmanned mode. However, with the growth in distance learning, the need to reexamine this model might be returning.

■ *Student employees can become IT advocates within the student body.*

Many campus IT departments, at one time or another, have experienced the crush for services that leave faculty, staff, and students in an uproar over unacceptable response times. During one particularly bad semester in 1998,

our IT department was feeling the heat from all directions, including the student-run newspaper.

At that time, however, one of my student employees who worked in our faculty development studio also worked for the student paper. This student chose, on his own, to publish an editorial defending the IT department from the perspective of a student on the inside. We all know how hard we work and the insane schedules sometimes required. But, until you've walked the proverbial mile in the other man's moccasins, you just don't understand. The words this student shared with his classmates meant more than any of the explanations we "grown ups" had offered up to that point.

■ *Student employees can serve as a conduit into the student body to help you understand the feelings, trends, and interests of your campus.*

Ever wondered what the hot trend is among students? What peer-to-peer (P2P) application is all the rage now? What games are chewing up the network? Whether students would consider paying a fee for high-speed Internet access? Ask a student directly and often the "shields go up" out of pure instinct. Earn the trust and respect of your student staff, and they'll tell you at the water cooler without even being asked.

■ *Some students are very tech-savvy.*
Let's face it—students have more free time than professional staff members. They don't usually have families, or houses, or community groups, or any of the other myriad responsibilities facing the average working adult. The best students are curious, almost beyond belief. Need help with a creative solution to a challenging technical problem? Tell one of your star students that it can't be done and watch what happens. Student staff can be great at helping professionals think "out of the box."

■ *Students are a flexible resource, boundless by organizational hierarchies.*

The IT world is full of high-demand periods that wax and wane, sometimes unpredictably. When demand in one area rises as another one falls, having students

cross-trained allows you to deploy them to the area with the highest need. Think of them as "burstable bandwidth."

■ *And, finally, they are affordable.*

I would be remiss if I didn't touch on this aspect. When a student employee qualifies for work-study, that staff member is essentially free—paid for by state and local government. Otherwise, the funds come from our budget. And, while we endeavor to be competitive with other student employment options, in the end, we can make our salary dollars go farther with student staff than we can with temporary staff.

Advice for the Unwary

If, after reading this far, you are chomping at the bit to start or expand your own student workforce, allow me to share some observations of when things didn't work out as we had planned. I'll also discuss the management tactics we've developed as a direct result of these missteps. The good news, though, is that with careful planning, you can minimize poor experiences and your overall risk of exposure.

■ *Student employees require a thoughtful training program.*

OK, you hire a group of students to work in your campus computing clusters. They already know how to use computers. You've explained when time-sheets must be turned in, posted the work schedule, and shown everyone how to arm and disarm the security system. Nothing left to do now but sit back and watch productivity soar, right? Maybe in Perfect, USA, but we don't live anywhere near there. If what I just described was the extent of your planned or existing training program, here's a sampling of what might happen.

Paper will jam in a lab printer, and your student staff may or may not know how to correct the situation. For that matter, the students might not realize it's their job to care for the printers—or even report the malfunction.

Since your campus computing clusters provide a home for your high-speed laser printers, these facilities also stock cases of paper. It seems natural, then,

that if a faculty member or department should need paper, they should just come to the cluster and "borrow" a few thousand sheets. Your highly trained students will know how to react in this situation, right?

You didn't get where you are in your career without training. You probably did a lot of it on your own, too, but you had mentors, you had goals, and you had the desire to succeed.

Duquesne University has developed a training program called Opportunity Knocks¹ specifically to train new and returning student employees who fill IT positions both within and outside our department. This program, active since 1996, has evolved every year and will continue to do so in the years to come. Loosely, though, the program involves having the students come to campus two weeks before the fall semester begins to participate in seven or eight days of training on topics such as professional responsibility, customer service, departmental procedures, and hands-on technical skills. Annually, this program costs the department approximately \$13,000. The experiences of the students, and the professional staff that deploy the program, have been well worth the cost. The mere fact that the students can "hit the ground running" at the start of the fall semester is practically all the justification we need to continue this training.

Opportunity Knocks has another valuable benefit. It allows us to see students in action. We can measure their ability to pay attention, arrive to sessions on time, follow instructions, and generally take themselves seriously when necessary. Participation in Opportunity Knocks is not a guarantee of employment, either. Also, if we offer a job to a student, and he turns it down, he forfeits the pay he would have received for his attendance. This serves to root out the students who simply wanted to move in early.

Regardless of the training program you implement, you should also use this exercise as a means to assess and understand the services offered by your department and identify where students fit and where they do not. For instance, it's unlikely that students would fit well as programmers in the administrative programming

group. However, they may provide excellent support for your data-center operations staff. This will depend on the mix of responsibilities within each functional unit of your department and how factors such as maturity, responsibility, and transience affect a student's ability to perform the job duties successfully.

Placing students in positions where they can succeed and providing them with the necessary skills is paramount in establishing an effective student employment program. For a more in-depth look at Opportunity Knocks, please visit the Web site² or refer to Cynthia Golden's article on the program.³

■ *Student employees can be transient.*

Well, now that training is covered, you can rest easy knowing that bright, responsible, and trained young adults are staffing your facilities. Until, that is, a call comes in to your help desk at 8:00 a.m. to report a problem with a facility.

"What's the problem?" you ask. "Something wrong with the equipment?"

"I wouldn't know," responds the caller. "The facility hasn't been opened yet."

As others will point out, students seem to come and go, almost without warning. No amount of training or preparation will change this fact. To prepare for this eventuality, you must simply adhere to the age-old wisdom of not putting all your eggs in one basket.

Never deploy a service that depends on one, and only one, student. Cross-train, share responsibilities, and give students ample opportunity to warn you of impending changes in their schedule or lifestyle. Make sure your student workers understand that you expect, and are prepared for, these changes, and that the earlier they let you know, the easier it will be for all involved.

Develop a fair and equitable system of reward and discipline. Now that you've trained your students and ensured the necessary coverage, how do you also ensure that you are getting the most from your student staff and that they are getting the most from the experience?

For instance, students that staff remote facilities such as computer labs report directly to their posts, sometimes at odd hours. If you can maintain the quality of

work from this group, then your model will almost certainly work for students under closer supervision. If you can't, however, not only do you diminish the experience of clients in the facility, but also you undermine the ability of all of your student employees to be successful.

One of the tactics we have employed to encourage good behavior is a points system tied to such perks as salary (in a small way), scheduling preference, and enhanced responsibilities. Simply put, students earn points for doing a good job and lose points for transgressions. A student who completes a semester with zero points has done exactly the job asked. Finishing with a negative total indicates room for improvement. Those who have excelled are identified with a positive point total.

This system has had two positive outcomes: our student employees now want to be "caught" doing a good job, and, as a consequence of their improved performance, our computer lab assistants are now more respected by lab patrons. This increased respect has translated into better cooperation, as when lab assistants request that patrons "swipe in" and "swipe out," resulting in much more accurate usage data.

Beyond benefiting from incentive systems unique to the needs of students, these employees should be treated no differently than full-time professional staff. If the professional staff sign a confidentiality form, have your students sign one as well. If the full-timers have an administrative policy document, develop a student handbook outlining student employee roles and responsibilities. Have students read it and sign a document stating that they understand it and agree to abide by its contents. Update this handbook every year, and make sure the full-time staff understand it as well.

If you're clear about your expectations, and those expectations have visible and reliable consequences (both positive and negative), you avoid the scenario of surprising students or their supervisors. The good news, though, is that this is really just an extension of the good management practices already in place for your professional staff—it will work with your students.

No Looking Back

The question posed in the title of this article, "Student Workers: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?" was, in my mind, somewhat rhetorical. From my point of view, this question is no different than "Funding: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without It?" or "Servers: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?"

The fact is, any resource applied inappropriately, poorly managed, or inadequately planned can harm your organization. Without good lifecycle funding models, IT budget increases amount to throwing good money after bad. Without proper data-center management, system administrators die a slow, spiraling death in the midst of a one-new-server-per-application implementation model. The list could go on.

I'd encourage anyone who manages information technology resources on campus to carefully consider the best ways to apply student employees in their daily operations. Keep in mind, though, one size does not fit all. You should be prepared to tailor your implementation to your campus culture. With this kind of thoughtful consideration, the experience can be rewarding and valuable for you, your students, your organization, and your institution. In whatever you do, though, remember to keep an open mind, be creative, and learn from your mistakes. *e*

Endnotes

1. For more on the Opportunity Knocks program, see the Web at <<http://www.duq.edu/ok>>.
2. Ibid.
3. C. Golden, "Opportunity Knocks! A Student Employment Preparation Program," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2000, pp. 60-62.

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