

They Are Employees, After All

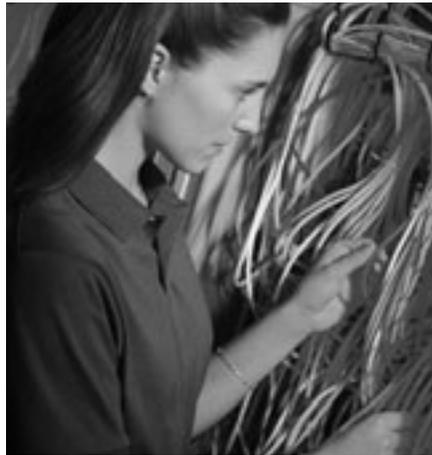
Treating student workers the same as any other university employees is a win-win situation for students and the institution

By **Ronald W. Barden**

During the past year, EDUCAUSE has published two articles addressing the use of student employment—the author of one supported student employment,¹ whereas the other expressed concerns over dependence on a student workforce.² While both have valid points, I believe there are additional issues to be brought forth. I have used student workers since the days of the 80-column card. I am sure this dates me—ever so slightly—but hang with me for a few paragraphs and let's see if we have found the best approach to providing optimal technology support services for our clients.

In 1997, Clayton College & State University (CCSU) was among the first three public universities to require all students to have notebook computers. We started by charging students a technology fee and providing them with a standard-issue notebook computer with a standard load of software and a commercial ISP—this was called the Information Technology Project, or ITP. Four years later, after many forums and lots of input from students and faculty, the project took on a different approach, wherein students paid a considerably reduced technology fee and provided their own notebook computers (which must meet a minimum configuration) and their own ISPs. Currently, students are required to have on-demand access to new, used, borrowed, or shared notebook computers. The project is now known as ITP Choice, for obvious reasons.

No matter what the flavor, a ubiquitous computing environment requires an attentive, well-trained service workforce—one that we did not have at the



outset of ITP. We quickly determined that the learning curve was “straight up” or “straight down,” depending on which side of the service counter you stood. After we began to see through the smoke and our first wave of students was sitting in class at their personal keyboards, clicking their way to a new era of teaching and learning, we decided there must be a better way to produce the quality of service we strove to provide.

Initially, the workforce consisted of two full-time staffers and a number of IT student assistants to serve 5,000 students and 300 faculty. We had limited success with our minimally trained staff, but we were learning, and the desire was there to do a good job. It was our responsibility to develop the distribution, maintenance, return, and inventory for 5,000+ notebook computers in addition to setup, installation, diagnosis, and repair of all CCSU-owned desktop computers located in offices across campus.

After several false starts and increasing the number of full-time staff, a student training program was established,

dubbed “The Spirit of ITP.” Developed in-house, the program was designed and implemented to help student assistants become better service providers. We determined through trial and error that we needed to incorporate soft skills and work ethics into our technical training. Many hours were spent developing a curriculum and soliciting input and participation from experts among our faculty, staff, and administrators, and the efforts paid off with huge dividends. The approach became obvious: hire students with “people” skills who also have a technical aptitude, and hone their basic human-relations skills. The rationale—as all of us who have survived in the technology support services field know—is that you can fix the computer problem, but you also need to alleviate the client's anxiety. It only takes one service technician having a bad day to undermine the best reputation.

Feedback from our Comments & Suggestions cards indicates that the help desk (HUB) staff is providing outstanding services to our students, faculty, and staff. This is because our full-time HUB staff have invested the time and effort to provide an ongoing training program that treats student workers like employees. Like any other employee, students are evaluated and, if accepted, are placed in a challenging environment where they can successfully provide quality service in a customer-friendly environment.

The benefits to our students do not stop here, however. We find that we are adding value to students' academic learning environment. We believe that when students connect with our institution,

they increase their chances of graduating. Support for these assumptions is found in Vincent Tinto's *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, in which he stated that "some forms of work on campus ... appear to somewhat improve one's chances of finishing a degree program."³ Tinto continued, "...on-campus employment seems to enhance one's interaction with other members of the institution and heighten one's integration into the life of the college." Further, Alexander W. Astin, in *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, stated, "Certainly the most clear-cut finding is the positive impact of student employment on persistence."⁴

The full-time help-desk employees are continually updating the student training program. The plan is to offer new components each summer to enhance their skills. The initial training program consisted of customer service skills and work ethics. They have added more technical training in hardware repairs, software installation, and software support services.

The training program has also nurtured two-way communication between clients (students, faculty, and staff) and the HUB student staff. Faculty are no longer reluctant to allow HUB students to assist them with their technology needs. This acceptance has taken several years to accomplish, and we attribute it to the technical and soft skills developed in the program. An added benefit of the training sessions is that HUB students have learned the value of teamwork. They help each other and give credit and praise for one another's accomplishments.

Training student workers is an example of positive return on investment, and it reaps the same positive results as investing in full-time staff. It is a classic win-win situation. The university wins because services provided by student staff cost much less than the expense of additional full-time staff. We believe that the students, faculty, and staff of CCSU have benefited from the excellent customer service and quality technical support that are the

products of a well-trained staff. Students win because of the exposure to a real-time work environment where they learn soft skills and work ethics along with technical training. *e*

Endnotes

1. J. Brown, "Student Workers: Can Campus IT Departments Live Without Them?" *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003.
2. J. Mrazek, "Student Workers: The Narcotic Tech Departments Can't Live Without," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003.
3. V. Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 64.
4. A. W. Astin, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975), p. 162.

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