Opportunity Knocks! A Student Employment Preparation Program

Duquesne University has found a good solution to the challenge of meeting escalating demands for information technology support across campus in the face of limited financial and human resources. Its Opportunity Knocks program has enabled the university to train students to fill this need while simultaneously offering them an opportunity to develop valuable skills for their future.

by **Cynthia Golden**

In the spring of 1996 the information technology (IT) support service crisis was upon us.[1] At Duquesne University we were not alone as we experienced a rapidly increasing demand for IT services and limited growth in budgets. We knew we needed to improve support to the campus, but we simply didn't have the staff to do it. One of the strategies we used to address the support service crisis was to make better use of one of the university's greatest assets, our students.

Computing and Technology Services (CTS) had always hired and relied on student workers, but they were small in number and had diverse skills and abilities and what little training they received was most often insufficient and obtained on the job. Based upon our experience, however, we knew that there were certain key service areas where students worked well and could excel. These included working as help desk consultants, computer service technicians, lab consultants, multimedia application developers, and Web designers. If we wanted to use students to help improve services, we knew we needed more students in these kinds of positions and more thorough training of the students.

To prepare students for these jobs, CTS developed an employment preparation program that we call Opportunity Knocks. Opportunity Knocks offers the students an *opportunity* to learn valuable skills that are in demand in every profession, an *opportunity* to work in an apprenticeship capacity before entering the

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workforce, and an *opportunity* to serve their university while earning money to support their education.

Program Description

In place since 1996, the program brings potential and returning student employees to campus before the beginning of fall classes. Students participate in six days of classroom as well as on-the-job training. The schedule includes four days of general sessions that cover such topics

as how to provide excellent customer service; campus security precautions; an overview of the campus network; how to use the Internet; "nuts and bolts" of computers and peripheral devices; computer viruses and how to cure them; and much, much more. Computer-based training on commonly used software like Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint, and Word is also part of the program.

Students then select the areas of technology that might be of interest to them and spend their final days in on-the-job training. During this time they perform the real, day-to-day functions of positions in areas like the computer store, Faculty Development Studio, help desk, and student computer labs. Student technicians work side by side with full-time staff on hardware installation and repair as well as software support.

The Opportunity Knocks sessions are taught by staff from CTS as well as by some returning student employees. Representatives of other campus organizations, such as the library, Public Safety, Human Resources, and Student Life, play an integral part in the success of the program.

Upon completion of Opportunity Knocks, some students may be offered student employment positions with

Suggestions for Organizing a Student IT Employment Program

✓ **Consult available resources**
The TLT Group offers workshops for institutions that want to develop student technology consultant programs. These workshops contain a wealth of information, and attending one would be a great way to prepare. The STAC-list is a listserv where issues related to student IT employees are discussed. See http://www.tltgroup.org/ programs/sta.html for more information about these activities.

✓ **Designate a project leader**
Putting together a program like Opportunity Knocks (OK) requires the attention of a full-time staff member. It is best to select someone whose job it will be to work with some of the student employees throughout the year. This person should have excellent organizational skills and experience in project management.

✓ **Build support on campus**
It takes cooperation from many parts of the organization to launch a student IT employment program successfully. The IT organization needs to rely on other units within the institution for obtaining funding, early move-in to the residence halls, advertising, food service, and related services. Pitching the idea for an OK program at every opportunity will help build this needed support.

✓ **Develop a budget and obtain funding**
A key part of our program at Duquesne is that we pay students to attend, and this has comprised the biggest chunk of our costs. A portion of the student fees that are directed toward technology support the OK program, with in-kind assistance from the division of Student Life. Other institutions have received external funding to support their student employment training programs. Determine what the possibilities are for your institution, and act early.

✓ **Recruit students**
Don't wait until finals week in the spring to begin your recruitment campaign. Begin early in the fall semester, and use all avenues available to you. Student organizations, the newspaper, and the faculty can all help get the word out. Having the program application available on the Web makes it easy for a student to indicate interest in the program.

✓ **Develop the curriculum**
This is the real meat of the program. Determine the skills the students need to have. Pull your team of instructors together early. Use commercially available materials where possible.

✓ **Plan the Logistics**
The project leader needs to make sure that accepted students are notified, that the facilities to be used during the program are reserved, that appropriate software is installed, and that appropriate materials are prepared. He or she also needs to be sure that the students' arrival on campus and their obtain-ing room keys, meal cards, and other information all go smoothly. We believe it is the little things that make a difference. Information packets with the details of the week should be in the students' rooms upon arrival. Everyone needs a nametag. And above all, if there is a problem, the students need to have one person to contact to help them resolve it.

✓ **Make the hiring selections**
Begin early in the program to evaluate the work of students and consider who might be right for your positions. The instructors and hiring managers should get together to assess the work of the attendees so that employment offers can be made to students at the end of the program.

✓ **Evaluate your efforts**
Ask the student attendees to evaluate the program. Hold a plus/delta discussion with the instructors to determine what worked well and what should be changed from their perspective. Incorporate all feedback into next year's program.

✓ **Follow up**
Throughout the year student employees need reinforcement of the concepts and skills they learned in their pre-employment training program. Short seminars, workshops, or online sessions can work well to accomplish this.

CTS while others may take their new skills to other student jobs on campus.

Special Features of the Program

To make it easier for students to leave their summer jobs and return to Duquesne a little earlier than usual, arrangements are made with Residence Life for students to stay in the residence halls free of charge. Meals are also provided at no charge, whether or not the student chooses to live on campus for the duration of the program. Students are compensated for the time they spend in the training sessions but are not guaranteed a job upon completion.

Social activities, including walking tours of Pittsburgh, movies, and a session-closing picnic, are also part of the program. Recognizing that many of the participants are freshmen, some new to Pittsburgh, a special effort is made to encourage them to participate in the social as well as academic events of the week.

Since its inception, more than 200 students have participated in the program. Not only have these students provided valuable services to the university and earned money to finance their education, but graduates have gone on to professional positions equipped with valuable skills and well prepared to excel in a society where technology is advancing at a rapid pace.

Program Costs

At Duquesne the costs for the August program break down into staff time, meals for participants, salary for participants, and incidental expenses like materials and T-shirts. The division of Student Life assumes the cost of the rooms. During the year, of course, salary expenses must be paid. The funding for the entire program comes directly from the portion of the university fees dedicated to information technology.

Program Impact

At the help desk we are now able to handle the increase in volume of walk-in, e-mail, and phone inquiries with the addition of the student employees. Student workers, supplementing the full-time staff, work at the walk-up desk, answer the phones, and respond to e-mail. We usually don't have long queues at the walk-in desk, most phone calls do not go to voice mail, and e-mail questions receive replies within four business hours.

The drawback, of course, to relying so heavily on student employees to provide key services is precisely that they are students, and we believe their primary responsibility is to be a student.

Students who use the public labs can now have many of their questions answered immediately by a knowledgeable lab consultant. We don't know how many of these questions would have come to the help desk in the past or how many would simply have gone unanswered. The lab consultant on duty will call the help desk only if he or she can't answer a question or solve a problem. Minor problems with lab equipment can be fixed immediately by a trained lab consultant. If a problem can't be fixed, it is reported to our help desk after there has been a first-line attempt at a remedy by the student consultant.

Student workers in the computer store provide pre- and post-sales consultation to customers as well as maintain current price lists. Our computer sales volume has more than doubled since 1996, but the number of full-time staff has not.

The drawback, of course, to relying so heavily on student employees to provide key services is precisely that they *are* students, and we believe their primary responsibility is to be a student. That means at finals time we often have to scramble to adjust schedules and sometimes a student staff member will "call off" at the last minute under pressure to prepare for an exam or finish a project. The important thing is to find a balance in the number of full-time staff to the number of students and to assign students to jobs that have the backup and oversight of a full-time staff member.

We've learned much since that first summer of advertising and recruiting students, putting together curriculum, and working out all the logistical details. See the sidebar in this article for our suggestions for organizing a student employment program on your campus.

Endnote:

1. For a good discussion of these issues, see J. Michael Yohe, "Information Technology Support Services: Crisis or Opportunity," *CAUSE/EFFECT*, fall 1996, 6–13. [http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/cem9633.html]

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