

Changing the Face of Student Employment in IT at the University of Rochester

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Abstract

Student employees are the lifeblood of many IT organizations, and we often invest a lot of time, energy and resources to ensure their success and ours. Academic Technology Services at the University of Rochester employs over 140 students across many of its divisions such as public labs, help desk, computer store, and more. Until now, managers independently administered student employees in each area.

This separation of student employees in each area had many disadvantages. There was significant redundancy and duplication of efforts. Also, students who worked for small areas did not have flexibility in scheduling, finding shift coverage or options for training.

Beginning with the 2000-2001 academic year, Academic Technology Services will be combining all of its student employees into one large work force. Two full time staff members will oversee the daily operations while all the managers who have student employees will participate in a team to define the overall goals of the program with respect to their areas. The main components of the student employment program that we hope to address are payroll, scheduling, consistency in policies, centralized supervision, and wider training for all staff.

Keywords

Student Employees, Integration

1. Background

In the past, Information Technology services at the University of Rochester were decentralized. Three separate organizations existed to support different aspects of IT: the University Computing Center, Computer Sales, and Academic Media and Event Support. Each of these units provided very different services to faculty, staff and students, but they overlapped in certain areas. An important aspect of redundancy was that they all relied heavily on student employees to deliver their services. In July of 1999, the three groups united to become Academic Technology Services, in hopes of delivering a consolidated IT support system. One problem with this unification was that the policies and procedures for hiring, training, and

managing student employees were very inconsistent. Under ATS, student employment has grown in many areas, including student labs, a retail computer store, help desk, a faculty technology center, a classroom technology group, and a web development group. With this growth it was necessary to re-evaluate the student staff structure and reengineer the process to be efficient on a larger scale.

2. The Need for Change

The student staff system in place for many years at the University Computing Center focused primarily on the public lab employees. A full time manager of the lab was the sole authority for decisions about the students. He had a structure in place to promote several students to supervisor positions to help him administer the large number of lab employees. However, the work was still overwhelming, as the manager of the lab was also responsible for the technical maintenance of the equipment.

In addition, University Computing Center also promoted some students to "Technical Assistants." Once a student was promoted to this position, he was considered to be more capable of independent work and did not need direct supervision. The students in these positions did not attend regular training that was held for lab consultants. This was a problem for both the students and the full-time staff of the areas in which they worked. Without continuous training, the students often fell behind on their skills and were not able to meet the standards that were expected of them.

Finally, with the merger of the three IT units on campus, a need arose to provide consistency in student staff operations. Expectations had to be consistent with each area so that one area did not appear to be more favorable for student employees while another was left with no coverage.

3. The New Student Staff System

The first step in fixing some of the problems in the student employment system was to look at the existing structure. It was evident from the beginning that managing all the student staff was a tremendous amount of work that one person would not be able to handle alone. Figure A shows the new skeleton that emerged to make the task much more manageable.

The responsibilities of directly administering all aspects of the student employment system were divided between two full-time staff members. One would oversee the training program while the other was the administrator for discipline, payroll and record keeping. Each was dependent on the other to ensure that

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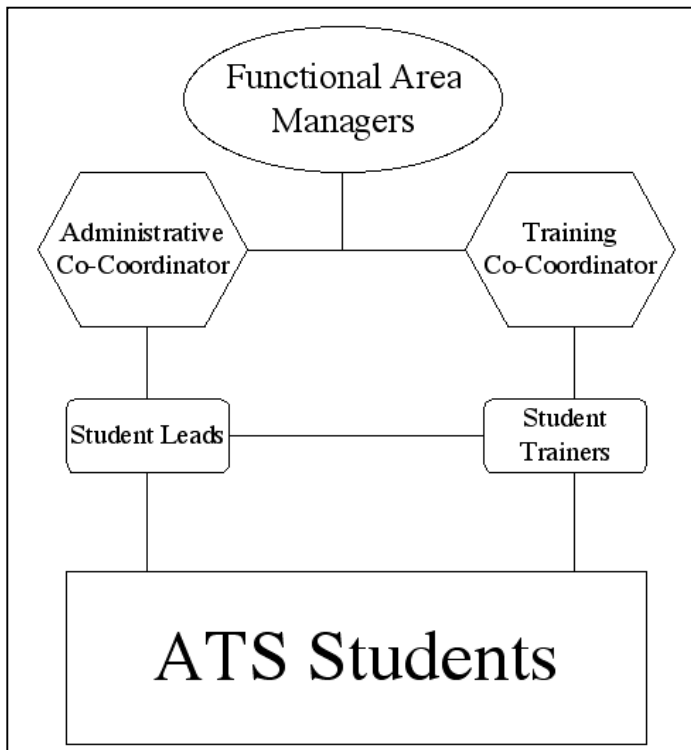
things were fair and done precisely. In addition, both shared duties such as hiring and promoting students.

The duties of directly overseeing the students in each area are left to the manager of the area. She will be able to define the duties of her employees and decide on the severity of various disciplinary issues. The area managers would also act as a governing board to oversee the overall program and ensure that it was consistent with their needs. Any major procedural items or changes in the program would be made under their advisement.

The support of the managers was essential, as the students would be working directly in each of their respective areas. Having obtained the approval of management, a student task force was convened, composed of current supervisors and leaders from each area of the student staff. This group was moderated and led by the full time student employment co-coordinators. Weekly meetings were held to place “meat” on the bones of the proposed skeletal structure. Issues about pay, training, job duties, and program structure at each level were discussed. The student staff co-coordinators met frequently with the area managers’ group to provide feedback and discuss progress.

After several months of meeting with both the student task force and the area managers’ group, all the elements were in place to implement the new student staff system. One of the key steps in doing this was to write one student employee handbook. Because it was written with the policies agreed upon by the area managers, there would be consistent enforcement across every group.

Figure A.



4. Benefits and Challenges

Integrating the student employees from all the areas of Academic Technology Services had many advantages and

challenges. A key advantage was that employment with Academic Technology Services now means a student could work in a variety of different jobs. Someone could easily attend training and be promoted into as many different types of jobs that he wanted to work. This is very appealing for a person who wants to try to learn as much about IT as he can before leaving the university. It also ensures that each employee can have a challenging and rewarding career with Academic Technology Services for four years without being bored.

An advantage for Academic Technology Services with the integration of student employment was that it became one employer instead of three. This meant that if a person was hired by Academic Technology Services, then she could work under any area within the organization. If an employee was terminated by Academic Technology Services, she could not go to one of the other areas under our umbrella and be rehired. This was a problem in the past where a student would be terminated from the University Computer Center and obtain a job at Computer Sales the following week.

A major challenge to the success of the new program was providing the appropriate training to all the students. The objective was to have one workforce that could be trained to work in a variety of areas within Academic Technology Services. This was very difficult because each area had its own needs, but they did overlap to some extent. With this in mind, a training program was developed to train each employee with a base set of skills and allow them to choose their own tracks to specialize in. The only limitation on an employee's ability to advance into his desired track would be a lack of need in the area to hire anymore students.

Another challenge facing the organization as a whole was the lack of additional funds to aid the program. It was made clear from the beginning that the student employment program needed to be reengineered, but there would be no more money allocated to it. In order to accommodate the growth in student employees and their training needs, we would need to be creative. The solution was to develop a multi-tier employee system. This helped save money because people were not getting promoted directly from a consultant level position to a Technical Assistant and paid significantly more money. We could thus eliminate the bulk of high paying TA jobs and provide more opportunity for students to be promoted to middle level jobs.

5. Conclusions

Combining several different groups of student staff into one is a difficult transition. Open, honest, and frequent communication between students, staff and management is essential throughout the process. A comprehensive, high quality cross-training program which students help design is a great way to ensure student support for the transition. By combining a logical skeletal structure with a body of training the students help design, Academic Technology Services hopes to successfully meet the goals of a unified student workforce.

