

Increasing Student Employee Morale and Retention by Developing Advanced Employment Opportunities: A Penn State Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The presenters manage two different groups of students with different responsibilities. Each was faced with the same problems—high turnover, the retention of good employees, and employee morale and motivation. The presenters will discuss how they individually addressed these issues by developing advanced employment opportunities.

While these programs are very different, they meet the same objectives—boosting student employee morale while rewarding and retaining good student employees.

This presentation is an overview of both programs. Both presenters will address the criteria for each program, why and how it was implemented, general student duties and responsibilities as well as the benefit to the students themselves.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and people management – *Management Techniques, Staffing, Training.*

General Terms: Management, Performance, Human Factors.

Keywords: Penn State University, Information Technology Services, Lab Consulting, Training, Student Staff, Morale, Retention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information Technology Services (ITS), a unit of The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), employs approximately 250 undergraduate and graduate students each year. These employees help keep our front line support running as help desk consultants, lab consultants, lab rovers and seminar instructor assistants.

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SIGUCCS'04, October 10-13, 2004, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
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Henry Moeller hires and trains approximately 150 students each year to provide software consulting in 13 student computing labs at the University Park campus. Christine Vucinich hires approximately 12 students each semester to assist faculty, staff and students in approximately 600, 2-3 hour computer and technology seminars that are offered throughout the year.

2. SENIOR LAB CONSULTING PROGRAM

2.1 Overview of the Program

The Senior Lab Consulting program allows more experienced lab consultants who have excelled in their current positions the opportunity to gain teaching and supervisory experience as well as build upon the technical knowledge they have already learned. This path of advancement gives them a change from helping users directly in the labs to training and guiding others in that duty. It motivates them to stay in the department longer and pass on the knowledge they have learned to newer consultants. The program has been in effect since 1999 and has succeeded in providing a higher level of customer service to users, an improved rate of employee retention in the group, and an increased level of motivation among the employees who now have something more to work towards.

2.1.1 Criteria for the program

The qualifications to be considered for a Senior Lab Consultant position include:

- A minimum of one full semester of employment within the Lab Consulting Group.
- At least one full semester left before graduation.
- An excellent performance record. Absences, lateness, customer service, teamwork on our chat client, and communication with management are considered.
- Initiative and leadership skills. Strong candidates are usually employees who are already taking on aspects of the Senior Consulting position out of enthusiasm and conscientiousness.

Candidates must participate in a one hour interview where we discuss the position's duties and requirements. During this

interview, they are given a variety of hypothetical situations to evaluate their judgment and decision-making skills.

2.1.2 Why and how it was implemented?

The Senior Consultant program was developed to provide a path of advancement for part-time student employees. It was also intended to improve the level of supervision for the consulting group, as well as maintain a higher level of training and resource management.

We accomplished this by training students to act as part-time supervisors. As they progressed, we offered them greater opportunities for leadership and mentor roles. Many of our existing procedures and resources have been developed or enhanced by these students, and the rest of the lab consulting group has responded very favorably to them.

2.1.3 General Student Duties and Responsibilities

As student supervisors, the Senior Lab Consultants have a prioritized list of duties and responsibilities as follows:

- Respond to any emergencies in the campus computer labs. This could be anything from fire alarms to medical emergencies.
- Assist any lab consultants with support and customer service if their lab is exceptionally busy. This would also include responding to any question or problem that the consultant needs help with or is not comfortable handling.
- Provide a higher level of technical support on Labman. (This is an in-house program that functions as both a time clock and a monitored chat client.)
- Train new hires in mentor shifts during which they can follow the Senior Consultant around in his or her duties and observe and ask questions. They may then work their own shift shadowed by a Senior Consultant until they are comfortable staffing the lab on their own.
- Make rounds walking between random labs and spot-checking the consultants to ensure their lab is maintained properly, to make sure they are in uniform, and to observe them in their duties. We have an on-line web form that the senior consultants must complete every time they visit a lab. This consists of objective questions that we incorporate into the visited employee's semester evaluations.
- Attend weekly meetings. At these meetings we discuss any problems that came up and how they were handled or could have been handled in a different manner. We also meet to keep all the managers and supervisors up to date on events and issues in the labs as well as employee performance problems or merits.
- Teach a small group training session at our Pre-semester Consultant Orientation. Each Senior Consultant prepares a station, and we conduct round robin training that instructs the new consultants on how to handle common problems or how to troubleshoot hardware in our labs. It also helps the consultants meet the student supervisors and puts the new supervisor in a mentor position right from the beginning. This helps establish

their authority and sets the tone for the supervisor/consultant relations throughout the semester.

2.1.4 Leadership Training

Most of the leadership training is done at our weekly staff meetings. We take problems as they occur and analyze them. If there are no examples or incidents that week that provoke discussion, we have prepared hypothetical scenarios or topics to help the Senior Consultants learn how to handle the many situations that arise during their shifts.

3. SENIOR INSTRUCTOR ASSISTANT PROGRAM

Using a model that existed with the Lab Consultant Program, the Senior Instructor Assistant Program was tailored, designed and piloted in Spring 2003 and continues to be a success. This program provides students an opportunity to advance within the Instructor Assistant Program and also recognizes students who have been informally serving as mentors to new students. Senior Instructor Assistants have the opportunity to gain valuable experience training new instructor assistants, assisting in the interview process, documenting training procedures and processes, and working on special projects with full-time staff members who serve as project leads.

3.1 Overview of the Program

ITS Training Services offers approximately 600 free computer and technology seminars to the students, faculty and staff of Penn State each year. Our typical seminars are 2-3 hours and are held on topics ranging from introductory topics in web, database, and graphic design, desktop publishing, teaching with technology, etc. to advanced topics such as JavaScript, Advanced Access, programming languages, etc. Instructor Assistants are part-time wage staff (typically full-time students) who work in the seminars. Instructor Assistants typically work 3-12 hours a week and are responsible for greeting seminar participants, taking attendance, distributing materials (as needed), reporting any lab problems, and assisting the participants and instructor before, during and after their assigned seminars. Approximately 10-15 Instructor Assistants work in our department each semester.

3.1.1 Criteria for the program

This program was developed with the following selection criteria:

- Has worked at least one semester for our department.
- Good standing with our department (including a good review).
- Interest in the responsibilities.

We have 3-4 Senior Instructor Assistants per semester depending on the number of students working that semester and the number who meet the criteria.

3.1.2 Why and how it was implemented

In fall 2002, we recognized several problems:

- Students talents underutilized
- No opportunity for advancement
- High turnover

- Students did not receive enough hours
- Low morale
- Abundance of work load for full time staff

After talking to Henry about his successful Senior Lab Consulting Program, Christine approached management to obtain permission to explore creating a senior-level Instructor Assistant Program and funding as students would receive pay increases for doing project work. She then met with four students, who had worked for the department the longest, to brainstorm such a program. These four students became the first Senior Instructor Assistants.

3.1.3 General Student Duties and Responsibilities

Senior Instructor Assistants have the following responsibilities:

- Assist with the Instructor Assistant interviews (to give their perspective and input during the interview process).
- Develop and present new Instructor Assistant training (1-1 training sessions for new hires).
- Serve as a mentor to new students during the seminars.

3.1.4 Project Work

In addition to the general duties outlined above, the students are also responsible for working on various projects throughout their tenure as a Senior Instructor Assistant. The projects that the students initially worked on included those directly related to the Instructor Assistant program: giving feedback to instructor assistant policies and guidelines, documenting various lab tools and procedures, helping to arrange the ice-breakers for meetings, assisting in the scheduling process, etc.

As the program evolved more of the Training Services staff requested Senior Instructor Assistants to help them on various projects. The program began to include a variety of Instructor Assistant Program projects as well as general Training Services projects. Projects included: leading a discussion during our end of the semester meeting, conducting a marketing/benchmarking project, and organizing a scavenger hunt activity during our annual ITS Event which promotes and explains our services to everyone at the university.

Current projects include database development, searching for online resources, organizing staff meetings, creating a software comparison chart for our web site, documenting case scenarios and adding new hiring information into ANGEL, Penn State's Course Management System.

The most significant project is the Training Services' Instructor Assistant Database, which was developed by Pat Capen (Senior Instructor Assistant, 2003-2004). This Microsoft Access Database was created to give our department a way to track all of our student employees, their Human Resource Information, budget information, Senior Instructor Assistant Projects and evaluations and pay raises. This database is helping to streamline processes and keep the program more organized.

This database will be demonstrated during our presentation. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. A screen capture of the Instructor Assistant Database.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of both programs were very positive. They include:

- Increase in employee retention—students are getting more hours in a greater variety of roles and have longer term goals within our organization.
- Increased morale—our employees feel a part of the team, they are more excited about work, and have a greater sense of accomplishment.
- Allows selected student employees to gain valuable experience by working alongside IT professionals.
- Students have begun using the program to satisfy internship requirements in both the technology and leadership fields.

By sharing our findings and experiences, we hope that other student employee managers in the IT field will be able to benefit from our experience and consider addressing similar problems by implementing unique advanced opportunities that would address the specific needs of their work unit.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to both thank our Senior Lab Consultants and Senior Instructor Assistants for their continued hard work, enthusiasm and dedication to ITS. Our thanks to everyone at Penn State who has helped us implement both of these programs and the SIGUCCS organization for giving us new ideas and allowing us to share our programs and ideas with all of you.

6. REFERENCES

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