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ABSTRACT

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (Minnesota), two coordinate, liberal arts colleges, have implemented a cost-effective student information technology (IT) support system. Project IMPACT (Implementing Academic Technology), a 5-year, $10 million plan to upgrade the technology for student and faculty use, was implemented in 1993. This paper focuses on the strategies used to design, implement, and sustain a successful IT support system. Practical ideas are provided for developing a strong student support staff and expanding services to meet increasing demand. The following topics are addressed: (1) student support structure, including supervisory positions; (2) the hiring process, including development of a long-term hiring plan; (3) scheduling student employees; (4) student employee training; (5) a mentoring program for student employees; (6) IT Services Student Employee Certification; (7) student employee expectations, including the IT Services Student Employee Policies and Procedures Manual and communication between supervisors and employees; (8) residence hall support services; (9) the help desk; (10) phone support; (11) peer-to-peer training; (12) budget implications; and (13) signs of success. (AEF)

Student Support that Works: A Solid Approach

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Introduction

Effectively supporting students' information technology (IT) needs is always a hot topic. The issues focus on identifying students' needs, implementing services that will meet these needs, providing these services effectively, and offering them within a limited budget.

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSB/SJU), two coordinate, liberal arts colleges, have implemented a student IT support system that works. Five years ago a disorganized, paper-based system was in place. Today, there is a full-service, cost-effective system that not only meets student needs but is pro-active.

This presentation will focus on the strategies used to design, implement and sustain a successful IT support system. It will provide practical ideas on developing a strong student support staff and expanding services to meet increasing demand.

History

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, while operating as two financially separate institutions are joint in all of their academic programs. In addition, many of the academic support areas are also joint, including the computing support. In February 1992, the two separate computing support areas, Academic Computing and Administrative Computing, merged. The new department, Computing Services, was designed to be more responsive to the needs of the institutions.

At the time of the merger, there was no formal plan for academic computing and the department had been sorely funded. There was a committee of faculty members, called the JCAC (Joint Committee on Academic Computing). During the spring of 1992, they put together a needs assessment that clearly showed the great demand for better academic technology. It was this needs assessment document that started a process that would fundamentally change the way the two colleges approach planning and support for academic technology.

Project IMPACT

The response to the needs assessment was a proposal called Project IMPACT (Implementing Academic Technology). This was a 5-year, $10 million plan to upgrade the technology for student and faculty use. Project IMPACT was approved by both institutions and implemented on July 1, 1993.

The JCAC's computer needs assessment report described the current academic computing resources as being "so limited as to threaten the competitiveness of their programs." In most areas the resources were lacking but especially those for student support. At the time, there were three student access areas, all of which only provided dual-floppy PCs. In addition to the old equipment and software, the labs themselves were unattractive and support for students was virtually not available. There was a small staff of student employees, called lab assistants, whose main task was to check software in and out. These lab assistants, however, only had limited training so were not able to provide much assistance to students with questions.

One of the first goals of Project IMPACT was to upgrade these computer access facilities. The result was five new computer access areas for student use. As these new areas were created, emphasis went not only to the new software and hardware but also to the aesthetics of the facility. These access areas now serve as a recruiting tool that showcase the technology available to all students.

Student comfort was another reason why aesthetics were considered a primary factor when upgrading the access areas. Each lab was designed to spaciously accommodate students. This included workspace around each computer, student collaboration space where appropriate and handicap accessible workstations. The emphasis was placed on a professional look and feel.

As the project progressed many mini-labs and residence hall computer clusters were added, more buildings and rooms were wired for access to the network and faculty were provided with development opportunities to utilize the technology. More importantly, the structure for student support was radically changed.

Student Support Structure

The first changes that were made in regard to student support were made because of necessity. Various staff members each had a few student employees that they supervised. Each student determined their own schedule and the staff members tried to make sure all the open hours in the access areas were covered by a student employee. This haphazard way of supervising the students created a system of no accountability and chaos. The structure was changed so that one staff person became the student employee staff supervisor. This created a more formal reporting structure for the students.

A student supervisor position was also created. This student was able to assist the staff supervisor with the various responsibilities. The student supervisor was also available during the evenings and weekends to assist the student lab assistants.

As more access areas were added and the times the areas were open for use expanded, more student employees had to be hired to fills these timeslots. Whenever an access area was open for student use there was to be at least one student employee available for assistance. With the number of student employees growing, it became harder to manage all of them with just the one staff and one student supervisor so more restructuring took place.

The student supervisor's title was changed to Student Manager. Then five Student Supervisors were hired. Now each supervisor is responsible for one access area and is accountable to the staff supervisor.

Hiring Process

Throughout the restructuring process an emphasis went on hiring the right students to fill each of the positions. The development of new job descriptions that contained detailed specifications of the job's responsibilities was extremely beneficial in the hiring process. One of the main criteria used when interviewing students was a high level of motivation to succeed. The long time career benefits of a student employee management position were also stressed with the applicants.

The last part of the restructuring process was to develop a long term hiring plan. Approximately one-quarter of the student employee staff has to be replaced each year. The goal is to fill these positions with highly motivated and responsible students who will be responsive to users' needs. Two factors affect this goal. One is the advancement opportunities available to student employees within the IT Services Department. The second is that students are able to schedule work hours around their class schedules.

Scheduling Student Employees

The next change came in regard to scheduling access area coverage. Originally, students were allowed to make their own schedules. Scheduling meetings were held each semester and the students signed up for hours starting with the seniors and finishing with the freshmen. This method resulted in many problems including not fulfill each student's work award and not accommodating their class schedules. It also created a lot of ill will among students.

The new method of scheduling was for the student employee staff supervisor, the student supervisors and the student manager to do the scheduling themselves. They start with a copy of all the employees' class schedules and first create the weekday schedule. Then they devise a rotat- ing weekend schedule so that each student has to work only one out of every three weekends.

Training

Attracting and hiring good student employees is not enough however. They must be trained from year to year. Therefore, the next phase was to revamp the training program for student lab assistants. The new training program focuses on two major areas: technical skills and customer service skills.

Mandatory training and optional training are provided. The mandatory training includes technical workshops, customer service training specific for working in the computer access areas and customer

service training provided by the Financial Aid office. Approximately twenty hours of mandatory training are required for each new student employee. Returning student employees are required to take an additional ten hours of training every year.

An orientation training session was also developed. All student employees are required to attend one of these sessions each fall semester. These sessions not only provide students with an introduction to the department and their responsibilities, but also provide them with an understanding of the importance of their role and how they fit into the larger mission of the colleges. The groundwork is laid for those students interested in moving to a Student Supervisor or Manager position in the future. In addition, expectations are set, policies and procedures are reviewed and the mandatory training requirements are explained.

Mentoring Program

A mentoring program was developed as part of the orientation process. Each new student employee is partnered with a returning student employee. This gives the new student a chance to ask questions on a one-to-one basis and to become familiar with the job responsibilities in a non-threatening environment. It also benefits the returning student employees, allowing them to refresh their skills and increase their sense of challenge while fostering teamwork.

Certification

The optional training has developed into what is called the IT Services Student Employee Certification. Certification has proven to be a positive motivator for student employees. The requirements are that a student must

have been an employee of the department for no less than one academic year
have completed all mandatory training sessions during that year
have been a mentor for a new employee
have no unexcused late-shifts or missed shifts
have completed the advanced technology workshops
have completed additional customer service workshops
have had an above average end-of-year performance appraisal

No student can be promoted to a Supervisor or Manager position without earning the certification.

Student Employee Expectations

The lab assistant's first priority is to assist the users in the access area. They must work well independently and are expected to project an image of service, deal with a variety of personalities and be self-motivated. Students also are expected to maintain an excellent attendance record.

The expectations of the student employees are clearly defined and communicated. All the students receive a detailed IT Services Student Employee Policies and Procedures Manual when they are employed. Also, the reprimand, warning and termination policies are used when necessary.

Solid communication between the staff supervisor and the student employees is essential due to the independent nature of the positions. Practically all communication is done electronically. The department is dependent upon e-mail for daily communication such as shift changes, up-to-the minute lab changes, etc. An electronic bulletin board accessible only to the IT Services department has proven to be an easy and effective way to organize and share policy and procedure information with student employees.

High importance has been placed on keeping the computer access facilities open and running. Student employees need immediate access to the student manager or supervisors in the case of equipment failures and problems with shift coverage. Therefore, the student manager or one of the supervisors carries a pager at all times. The student supervisor and manager also have access to the staff supervisor via a cell phone. This effective communication system allows quick resolution of problems and has resulted in virtually no down time in the access areas.

Residence Hall Support

Project IMPACT provided funding to wire all of the student rooms in the residence halls and enough ports were installed for each student in the residence halls. Each student can connect a personal PC and have access to all the software products running on the campus network. This includes access to the Internet.

As the number of students connecting personal PCs in their rooms increased, there was a definite need to provide in-room support services. Again, student employees were hired to fill this need.

These student employees, called Residence Hall Computer Assistants, (which increased from 2 to 8 over a period of three years) must have a technical background and the desire to learn both the hardware and software aspects of connecting to the intercampus network. Students selected for this position need to be willing to accept new responsibilities and challenges every time they walk into another student's room. The number of Residence Hall Computer Assistants has grown from two to eight and will continue to increase as more students connect personal PCs in the residence halls.

Special training is provided for these students and they are also encouraged to complete the certification program. These students assist in writing documentation for connecting PCs in the residence hall rooms. They also help define the training required for new Residence Hall Computer Assistants since they learn such valuable information while on the job.

Help Desk

Another goal of Project IMPACT was to create a professional "Help Desk" system. Prior to this a disorganized, paper-based system was used that was both ineffective and inefficient in responding to users' needs.

The new system consists of a professional Help Desk staff member and a call tracking software system. The concept was to provide a single point of contact for all computing related questions including those for hardware support. The entire IT Services staff has access to the call tracking software so calls are routed from the Help Desk to the appropriate staff member(s).

Since this was such a new way of addressing computing support needs, an internal marketing program directed at students, faculty and staff was implemented. A new phone number was established and it became the only phone number provided on any IT Services document. Even the staff members told users they should call the Help Desk to get faster response. Within sixty days the Help Desk line was recognized by users as the most effective means to quickly receive assistance.

As the Help Desk's success climbed the calls soon averaged over 1,000 in-coming calls per month. There was a backup to the Help Desk staff person but at times both people were overwhelmed with calls. In addition, this area became responsible for tracking all computer hardware inventory and coordinating schedules for the Residence Hall Computer Assistants. The need to relieve the pressure of this area became apparent and once again student employees were brought in to fill that need.

Student employees are now staffing the Help Desk on a part time basis, freeing up the Help Desk staff employee for other tasks associated with the Help Desk. In addition, they provide the backup support during the heaviest call periods. Utilization of student employees on the Help Desk has eliminated the need for adding another full-time staff member.

Students hired for these positions must present excellent customer services skills in the interview process. They are then enrolled in an intensive training program designed specifically for the Help Desk. Routine training throughout the year is provided and they are also encouraged to become certified.

Phone Support

In the continued effort to provide students with access to technology at the colleges, PCs were added to each of the residence halls on both campuses in what are called Residence Hall Computer Clusters. These areas are available to resident students 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This enhancement for students created a number of new support issues for IT Services. Most important was the need for phone support for these students. This support was added to the job responsibilities of the lab assistants.

In order to offer effective phone support to students, the student lab assistants were given training on phone etiquette and phone support techniques. These sessions have now been incorporated into the mandatory training program. Lab assistants now provide phone support to students calling from the Residence Hall Computer Clusters, individual rooms, and students who live off-campus. In addition they provide Help Desk support during the evenings and weekends.

Peer-to-Peer Training

Project IMPACT funded a full-time Training Coordinator to provide technology workshops to students, faculty and staff. However, the technology training was originally only offered during regular class hours during the day. Two years ago evening workshops were offered. These evening hours turned out to be the most convenient time for some students to attend workshops.

After analyzing many training methods, each having it's own set of strengths and weaknesses, it was decided to offer small group, instructor-lead workshops. This type of training allowed us to reach

as many students as possible while keeping the instruction individualized. More student employees were hired to teach these workshops.

This peer-to-peer training program has worked very well to-date. The students found themselves in a more-relaxed, pressure free environment. Not only did the students attending training say they were learning more, but many times were able to share their knowledge with the rest of the group. The group of student instructors has doubled in the past two years and the number of workshops provided has expanded greatly.

The evening workshop program has recently been expanded to collaborate with other academic support departments. Resume building and term paper workshops jointly facilitated with the Career Centers and the Writing Centers are now being offered to students. This collaboration between departments allowed students to have both context and layout resources available at the same time.

Budget Implications

Some of the improvements in student support were funded through Project IMPACT. However, most were through procedural changes that utilized existing resources to better accommodate the support needs. Many procedural changes did not affect the budget at all. Hiring additional student employees was a budget factor but financially it costs less to hire and train good student employees than it does to hire full-time staff. With Project IMPACT, the administration made a commitment to provide a high level of support services for students.

Signs of Success

The success of the improved IT student support services is apparent in many ways. The computer access facilities run at a 90% usage rate, Residence Hall Computer Clusters run at a 65% usage rate, and training workshops are usually full to capacity. Student feedback has been very positive on the facilities but more importantly, on the available support from the student employees.

IT Services student employee positions are highly sought after among the student body. It is common to have more than ten applicants for every open position at any given time. There have even been students who have volunteered to work in the department because they either don't have a work award through the Financial Aid office or already work in another area but want the experience in IT Services.

Students realize the multiple benefits of working in IT Services. Flexible scheduling, paid technical and customer service training, and the opportunity to advance to a leadership position are just a few of these benefits. Not only are the skills they learn applicable while working within IT Services, but many are also greatly desired skills in the greater marketplace. More than 50% of former student employees have come back to say one of the primary reasons they were offered their current employment position is due to the experience they received as an IT Service student employee.

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