

An LA&M Case Study

A Multi-Unit Approach to Interactive Training of Student Employees

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Can effective training be designed for temporary and student employees across multiple academic service units? This question was addressed by a group at the University of Washington (UW) Bothell after one student employee's misunderstanding of university policy ignited a lively discussion at a monthly Academic Services managers' meeting. It was discovered that many units were training on topics and procedures that were common to all, but that this training was neither consistent nor regular.

The management group consisted of leaders from the campus Academic Services units at UW Bothell. At this institution, Academic Services includes the Campus Library and Media Center, Information Systems, the Writing Center, the Quantitative Skills Center, Visual Resources, Educational Technology, and the Teaching and Learning Center. Although staffs regularly collaborate across these units to ensure delivery of services for students, they had never collaborated on student and temporary employee training and development. A sense of urgency to find some common ground in this area quickly emerged because, on a growing campus, these units were becoming increasingly dependent on a large, diverse pool of temporary employees. The group set out to design a quarterly training program that could meet multiple goals and provide cohesion across several service units.

Literature Review

The need for a regular, substantive student training program is not unique to UW Bothell. Burrows notes the advantages of using student employees as an inexpensive resource to perform "monotonous and repetitive tasks."¹ Although traditionally these jobs have been rather mundane, Foley stresses that the nature of student employee work has been rapidly changing, as developments in technology and declining budgets have forced the use of temporary employees who are required to do "a variety of more advanced tasks."² With greater responsibility, then, training becomes more critical, but difficult.

The published literature on student assistant training is extensive and covers a wide variety of topics. These

sources focus on multiple elements of a training program, with a common theme being the need for a comprehensive orientation emphasizing the importance of public services. Kathman stresses that: "The orientation should communicate the . . . mission, goals, and objectives to the student employees . . . [and] is a key opportunity to state and explain the goal of high quality service."³ Training becomes particularly important where student employees are often the first faces customers meet in many academic centers.⁴ Thus, in an article discussing a training program developed at Central Missouri State University Library Services, Riley and Wales argue that it is crucial that students be trained to refer patrons and answer simple questions about services offered by other units.⁵ Training can also be an ideal opportunity to meet staff and other students, and to discuss important topics such as diversity issues.⁶

Systematic training requires planning and coordination. Avila, Ford, and Hamre emphasize the importance of dedicating a task force to design, organize, and facilitate training.⁷ They describe a task force that created an exemplary training session for multiple service departments at the University of California Irvine Libraries. There, a committee collaboratively developed a list of core skills, training session outlines, and important topics such as working with disabled patrons, dealing with difficult customers, and handling emergency situations.⁸ In addition to forming a committee to focus on this work, Kathman highlights the importance of including library administration and the library director in the training process.⁹

While these articles examine general issues surrounding the training of student employees, they are, for the most part, limited to the library environment. The task at UW Bothell was unique in the regard that the need was to develop a training program for student assistants, tutors, technology consultants, and temporary employees not only for the library, but also for a variety of related

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academic support centers on campus, all operating under one umbrella—Academic Services.

Training Goals and Sessions

Student workers in the Academic Services Department include library and media student assistants, writing center and quantitative skills center tutors, and library technology, visual resources, and computer lab assistants, as well as computer helpdesk and Web services assistants. Academic Services units share the common goals of orienting students to university and departmental policies, providing an introduction to customer service, describing the missions of the units, addressing diversity issues, and reviewing safety practices. While seeking to incorporate best practices from each individual unit and elsewhere on campus, the Academic Services group also had an overarching goal to provide hourly employees with a vision of totality of Academic Services and to help them see how their positions are essential pieces of a bigger picture. Because these student employees are on the front lines of public services, it is critical that they understand whom they represent and how important they are to the success not only of Academic Services, but also the university. Finally, training must be streamlined to work within the limits of busy student schedules.

There was another complicating factor where the library was concerned. Because the Campus Library and Media Center, as well as the Visual Resources unit also serve another institution—Cascadia Community College (located on the same campus as UW Bothell)—training must recognize another level of services and procedures. So, another key part of training was to ensure that employees understood that some services are only for the university students, some were for both institutions, and how both should be treated.

The answer was to focus on the basic elements of training, while still providing global perspective in orientation sessions. A subcommittee of supervisors from the various units developed a comprehensive training session providing information essential to each unit, and also to the whole department. The resulting three-hour training sessions, offered during fall and winter quarters, are mandatory for all new temporary and student employees. Realizing that student schedules vary, efforts are made to offer sessions at flexible dates and times. Each training session is videotaped for those unable to attend. Students are paid to attend these sessions, and refreshments are offered to provide incentive and create a relaxed environment. The following is a description of the key components of the training.

- *Welcome, Introductions, and Overview of Each Unit:* After welcoming and thanking employees for their attendance, the facilitators ask attendees to introduce

themselves. Trainers proceed by giving an overview of Academic Services, explaining what the units do and how they all work together. Representatives from each unit describe their work and provide informative handouts. While this section contains a heavy lecture component, planners have sought to implement more interactive approaches to presenting introductory information. For example, at several of the most recent sessions, supervisors with laptops had participants go on an online “scavenger hunt,” where they looked up information about each unit. By doing this, students actively participated with unit heads in the information search and delivery processes. Additionally, library trainers took the opportunity to point out that the laptops the students were using for the exercise were also available for checkout from the library. This was a way to publicize a special service to new employees, who could then share this information when assisting students in the Computer Lab, Writing Center, or Quantitative Skills Center, or who might want to take advantage of the service themselves.

- *Director of Academic Services: “Who are Our Customers?”* The director of Academic Services gets personally involved in the training process by giving a presentation on the needs of the units’ customers. The director emphasizes the units’ roles in helping students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other customers, and discusses how many customers have special needs. For example, students who may be the first in their families to attend college, students who are working full-time and have families, single parents attending school, or at-risk students who need to develop confidence to succeed. While these messages are important by themselves, equally important is the director’s presence, providing a name and face to the leadership of Academic Services and conveying the importance for personal customer service. Because the director’s presence is so important to the process, scheduling flexibility may be required in order to ensure the director’s presence at training sessions.
- *Review of Policies:* Planning the content of the training session was an important step that required the collaboration of the supervisors from the various units. The group compiled a list of important Academic Services’ and university employees’ policies, then reviewed student assistant handbooks and policies from each unit to examine and compare their presentations. Because units had slight policy variations, this part of the planning process provided an opportunity for the group to clarify university policies, review ways to implement and enforce them, and discuss and improve the various unit practices. This discussion was a useful byproduct of the initiative.

The group found that there were inconsistencies in some specific unit policies, like protocols for taking breaks, coverage for absentees, and acceptable ways to

utilize downtime while at service desks. For example, depending on the nature of the job, some students might be permitted to eat while working; however, if the student is at a public service area, such as a computer lab or at the circulation desk, some supervisors do not allow food. Despite the differences, many policies were acceptable to all unit heads. Everyone agreed that students, tutors, and technology consultants needed to understand the difference between helping other students and doing their work for them. Training thus stressed the importance of providing guidance, but leaving the students to do their own work. Talking about differences and similarities in policies during the training session was particularly important for students who worked in multiple units.

Policies were shown in a PowerPoint presentation that included a handout listing critical information, such as policies on university academic misconduct, nondiscrimination, affirmative action, sexual harassment, computer use, and other university services. While student employees are not expected to advise and counsel customers on policy matters, it is important that they know these services and documents exist, and to make referrals as appropriate. When the units apply policies differently, the students are told to check with their supervisors for answers to specific questions.

- *Discussion of Customer Service Scenarios:* Two goals of the training—getting to know other student employees and staff, and thinking about difficult situations they might encounter—are met in this section. Small groups, with representation from multiple units, are created to discuss a set of customer-service scenarios (see appendix) and determine how best to handle each situation. The scenarios may be more pertinent to one unit of Academic Services than another, but all hourly assistants participate in the discussion in order to increase awareness across departments. Supervisors also participate in the discussion to clarify misunderstandings and reinforce the desired outcomes for each scenario.

This session in particular has evolved over the course of this program to include participation and active learning. Initially, human-resource experts were brought in to discuss these issues, but feedback from students was not entirely positive. Subsequent experience has proven that when small groups discuss and present solutions to the scenarios, learning is more effective. In practice, employees often refer back to these scenarios when a similar issue arises. Participants also have offered additional scenarios for consideration. This reinforces the importance of reviewing and modifying sessions in response to student comments.

- *Discussion with Public Safety:* Safety is certainly a common concern within all Academic Services units.

The structure of this portion of the training has also changed, but it currently is given in the form of a safety quiz led by the director of public safety. Topics in the safety quiz include fire and emergency procedures, locations of evacuation areas, and questions about suspicious and threatening persons. Again, the interactive quiz engages employees more actively than delivering information in a lecture. The training becomes a two-way conversation and creates a space for dialogue and discussion with and between employees from other departments, managers, and public safety officers.

As a result of this process, the unit supervisors have discovered that very few students know the basics of campus security. For example, many student workers are not aware that fire doors will come down over the stairwells when an alarm goes off, they do not know where their evacuation area is located, or they do not know there is an emergency quick response button on every campus phone. Providing this information to student employees empowers them in cases of emergencies and presents critical information that they too often miss.

- *Feedback:* Evaluations are handed out at the end of each training session. Trainers leave ample time at the end of each session for evaluations, resulting in a high response rate. Using a combination Likert-type scale along with open-ended questions, supervisors assess the training sessions from one year to the next. The scale rates the effectiveness of the main components of the event—Overview, Scenarios, Safety Quiz, and so on. While the average values of the scaled items have stayed fairly consistent from year to year, comments elicited from the open-ended questions have been the greatest source of substantive feedback.

To date, participants have rated the sessions highly, and almost all agree that the training was a valuable experience. Student employees frequently comment on the valuable learning experience provided by the scenarios and state that they appreciate the high level of engagement. (One comment from a student stated that he had learned more about the campus in our half-day session than he had learned during his two years as a student on campus). More importantly, critical feedback has provided invaluable suggestions for improvements; for example, requests for more time to interact with other employees, ideas for additional scenarios, and critiques of presentations.

Modifications and Future Challenges

Several changes to the training session, now in its fifth year, have been made as a result of observation and feedback. At first, all unit heads had facilitator roles during the workshop.

As the sessions evolved, the director of the Quantitative Skills Center and the Access Services librarian consolidated the roles of the primary facilitators and planners. This created clearer and more efficient delegation of responsibilities. However, other managers are invited to participate at any of the sessions—especially during unit introductions.

Also, as stressed previously, the planners have transformed the session from an information-giving activity to an interactive one, enabling employees to practice and retain the information, while also creating important bonds across units. In the beginning, multiple guest speakers gave presentations during the sessions. While the presentations provided important information, this method was lecture-based, limited as a learning tool, and provided few opportunities for interaction. Student employees felt overwhelmed, and the goal of having them get to know each other and feel part of a bigger team was not achieved. Further, lining up a variety of speakers every quarter proved to be a daunting task. While still including key guests, such as the director of the library and a safety officer, taking time to develop meaningful active-learning opportunities for the training has become a higher priority. These activities, especially the scenarios and safety quiz, provide many opportunities for discussions about dealing with difficult people, utilizing campus resources, and implementing policies. As confirmed by multiple authors, these activities help students retain more of the information, experience less information overload, and see themselves as part of the bigger Academic Services picture.¹⁰

Because the training is mandatory, student employees who miss or cannot attend the training are required to watch a videotape of the session. However, the videotape cannot capture the crucial interaction time in the sessions and is not considered as useful. The option of holding an additional session or developing supplemental materials to support those who are unable to attend is being explored.

Another modification under consideration is that of including permanent staff as participants in the training. While all supervisors are encouraged to attend the training, to date other permanent staff have not participated. Many new permanent employees have commented that they wished that they had also received similar training. Recently, training coincided with an Academic Services staff diversity event. The two events were bridged with a brownbag lunch, allowing for further connections and collaboration. Finding still more ways to bridge trainings of temporary employees with meetings of the permanent staff would be advantageous.

A major challenge is keeping students' attention during the three-hour session. To keep the session fresh, facilitators do purposeful planning prior to each one. This training cannot be prepackaged, dusted off, and used quarter after quarter. Each time the workshop is taught, specific preparations are made to address the needs of that particular audience. Large audiences differ from small audi-

ences. Composition of the group (for example, heavy on Writing Center tutors, light on library staff) also affects its dynamics. Evaluations are carefully reviewed for suggested adjustments to the program. Questions that facilitators continually ask include: Is the introduction too long? Did we lose interest midway through the event? How do we get the most critical information across while keeping the presentation fluid and energetic?

A second challenge is addressing the information needs of students who work in more than one unit. These students often have the most questions about policies and procedures. It is important for them to understand that they might follow one set of work or safety procedures at one job and not at another. They are encouraged to always check with a supervisor if they are confused about a policy covered at the workshop or if they are getting different information from their units. For example, if a student works in the library, his or her emergency evacuation location would be at the north side of the building; but if he or she happened to be working in the Writing Center during an emergency, he or she would report to an evacuation area at the southwest part of campus. These details are crucial during an emergency. Another example is that if a student is working at the circulation desk in the library, he or she would be asked not to do homework during a shift; however, if he or she is working at the other end of the desk as a technology consultant, doing homework is acceptable once all other tasks have been completed. These procedures address public services issues that are distinct, but equally important within each unit.

A third challenge is providing follow-up sessions. Although this workshop is almost three hours long, it barely covers the basics, and supervisors see a need for additional training. Some topics are given additional time within the individual units, but some would be well served by a later cross-unit training. Time to organize and coordinate additional training is one of the biggest barriers, and supervisors continue to investigate different ways to make training an ongoing effort. For example, the library has recently begun testing some online tutorial software. This tool might be an excellent way to reinforce information shared at the workshop, while giving trainers an opportunity to focus on new topics.

The Academic Services staff believes the success of this training comes in large part from its interactive nature and fluidity. Supervisors continually look for new ideas to serve the needs of the campus and the student employees in Academic Services, who are a key part of its success. The cross-training model employed at UW Bothell was developed for the organizational needs of that institution, but this model is becoming increasingly common and, where it exists, it is to everybody's benefit that policies are broadly known. Overall, both employees and managers have found these training sessions invaluable. They efficiently introduce and reinforce key policies and procedures for employ-

ees, and provide the necessary link between their daily duties and the larger vision of Academic Services. Where similar overlapping responsibilities are shared between cross-units at other institutions, the UW Bothell model may prove useful.

References

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Appendix. Small Group Scenarios

1. A patron is offended by an exhibit in the library and comes to the desk to complain. What do you do?
2. A student comes to you with a long paper that obviously is largely plagiarized from a couple of sources. The student asks you to look at grammar and phrases. There are few or no citations for the sources. Each paragraph starts with a topic sentence in what appears to be the student's own words, and then is filled with plagiarized text that is being used as evidence for the topic sentence. The plagiarized sections of text are not tied together logically and do not have a clear relationship to the topic sentences. What should you say? What should you work on with the student?
3. Congratulations! You have become an employee for a unit within Academic Services! You are now a representative of your unit while on your regular shift and while you are casually walking around campus. It is your responsibility to make sure that other people understand what services your unit provides. One afternoon, while standing outside of the Campus Library and Media Center you are approached by one of your faculty members. They just found out about your new job and are interested in your unit and what its role on campus is. What do you tell them?
4. You are staffing a computer lab, and a student comes to you with a complaint. Someone at a neighboring computer is viewing sexually oriented Web sites. Your customer is feeling uncomfortable and distracted and asks you to deal with the situation. What do you do?
5. You are tutoring a student and she starts complaining about her instructor. She says that he doesn't come prepared for class, rolls his eyes when students ask questions, and won't respond to her e-mails. What do you do?
6. A student comes in five minutes before class and needs to print her Excel spreadsheet for an assignment. You have a policy clearly posted that the printer is only for staff use and students should use the printers in the computer labs. However, she insists that it is only one page and she doesn't have time to run to the computer lab and promises to buy you a latte after class if you will just print this one file from your account. What should you do?
7. It's slow or downtime at your job. Do you use the time to do your homework, surf the Web, or check e-mail? Leave? How do you utilize your time?
8. Because of your job, you've seen other students' work, papers, and work product. You are in the same class. When you sit down at home to complete your assignment, do you use the information you've seen in your classmates' papers to improve your own? How do you avoid plagiarism?