Our staff is a finite resource in the midst of an expanding, exciting, constantly changing computer discipline. How do we protect them so they stay encouraged enough to support and train users, excited about their field to be self learners, and knowledgeable enough to translate new products to sophisticated users? Our successful "Rotation Model" has accomplished this. Yearly we examine the front end based on what is working for us and the users, then we modify delivery of computer support. This presentation will discuss the flexible model and the foundational pillars that allow it to work.
Protecting Your Staff Resource

As a coach/manager I take two things seriously:

- First - getting the job done
- Second - developing a creative and productive staff.

These objectives are probably shared by each of us. They are also objectives which are, in some circumstances, incompatible. Getting the job done is a short-term objective, often one with a very constrained time frame and a profound sense of urgency. Cultivating a productive staff is a long-term objective, one which requires time for education, reflection, and a comprehensive vision of the institutional needs of our various organizations. Many of us are experiencing reduced budgets and unfilled positions, in the midst of an infinitely expanding, extremely exciting, constantly changing computer industry. We confront expanding responsibilities and decreasing resources to address those responsibilities.

So how do we manage this imbalance?

Most importantly, how do we protect the precious staff resource that we have?

How do we keep them encouraged enough

1. to support and train novice- and intermediate-level users?
2. to effectively support high-end and sophisticated users?
3. to be self learners in their field of expertise?

Over the last few years we have developed a successful model in the User Services Department at Mount Holyoke College for meeting these twin challenges. Briefly, the model can be described as one of strong foundational pillars with a flexible front end that changes yearly. Let me describe this model in greater detail.

The Foundational Pillars

There are three foundational pillars:

- the team,
- the specialists, and
- the coach/manager

The Team. I would say that it probably takes the good part of a year to develop a productive, well-tuned team. But this occurs only as the result of training, very good channels of communication, and nurturing by the coach/manager.

I begin this process of team building, by providing group information in a level playing field - no one knows this information about each other (including the manager). Together we do exercises and self tests that reveal our strengths, weaknesses, learning styles and work styles.
Then we review the components of the department. What is our mission? Our vision? What work has to be accomplished through this department? With what individuals or departments do we partner, and what impact does that partnership have on our resources? This process usually results in a long laundry list of items.

We then design positions (job descriptions) for ourselves (manager included) that are built around each individual's strengths. We move items from the "department work list" to each individual's job description. The fun stuff gets snatched up right away and some basics sit there unpicked. I have found, however, that if everyone is working from their strengths they stay motivated and we can fairly parse out the basic tasks, because they fall to everyone equally.

Specialists emerge as a result of this process. Building job descriptions around our strengths, both of character and knowledge, we end up with consultants each with different specialties. We followed this pattern and challenged ourselves that we would be expert in a few areas of computing, and work at having a good, but not expert, knowledge of the other areas. This relieved a great deal of pressure on the department, because no one felt as if he or she had to know absolutely everything about everything. We applied this to teaching workshops and writing documentation. The specialist would be responsible for the advanced levels of their topics, and the other staff would do intro- and intermediate levels.

An example of one of the specialists is the Mac Specialist. This consultant kept the whole department abreast of all the new equipment, systems and tools that Apple was producing. She also did all the research to integrate the new products into our current dual platform environment. She would come up with the creative solutions when product changes put sections of the campus out of business. This consultant was also expert in advanced training in Word, FileMaker, Pagemaker and use of electronic mail applications.

With the advent of the Power Mac, the specialist's role was critical in bringing User Services up to speed when PowerPC's hit our campus instantly. Her research, involving the DOS card and access to various networks from the DOS environment, played a key role in shaping how computing looks today in our Admissions and Career Development Offices. Because the specialist worked closely with the Macintosh platform and users, she played a vital role in helping plan each year's hardware and software purchase/upgrade process helping to save the college thousands of dollars yearly with wise recycling choices and purchase decisions.

The Mac specialist has recently been involved with transitioning offices to new versions of the Mac OS, cross-platform software, remote access and on the road computing. She continues to provide departmental training with a focus on improving productivity. It is natural for the specialist to think proactively about the needs of her departments, upgrade paths, innovative ideas for their field, training levels and helping users get the most out of their equipment. She has developed a strong level of expertise in recovering data from various forms of media and can repair all Mac computers at the component level.

To accomplish these tasks, training was made available to her at every level. At the application level, she attended Mac Academy, took a college level course in Desktop Publishing, and attended workshops sponsored by Microsoft and Claris. Her membership
in a local Macintosh User group enabled her to "connect" with local computer enthusiasts and service providers. Travel and membership was made possible for her to attend computer conferences such as CAUSE, NERCOMP, CLAC, and vendor and trade shows as well. She participated in the Apple support training programs and was an Apple Support Coordinator which opened up avenues for obtaining accurate and prompt answers to perplexing problems as well as technical training at the systems and hardware level.

**The Specialists input into the Team**

As each of the specialists continue their training, new information was often transmitted to the team during staff meetings. This allowed everyone to be a trainer and established a key role in the team for each. This also helped keep self confidence high.

There is a "shake out" phase in which some negotiating for changes in job responsibilities will take place. These can take place during a weekly staff meeting. I find that the information staff gain about each others’ working and thinking style has an incredibly positive effect on self image and healthy competition. There is more understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of "why someone does it that way". I also experience that staff will help other staff reshape their job around their strengths, even offering to take items they dislike. I offer a swap time of services that have become major irritants and are keeping the staff from satisfying the customer. One individual’s definition of a difficult situation, may not be the same as another's - so we swap.

**The coach** is the other pillar of success. I was initially inspired by John Wooden, the coach of basketball at UCLA, in his autobiography, *They Call Me Coach*. Wooden is renowned for developing some all time great players for UCLA that went on to be hall-of-famers in professional basketball. I was impressed that he didn’t have a “Wooden” strategy for which he would live or die. Instead he reshaped his team based on the strengths of each individual, each year. From the base of the strengths he would then overlay one, two or three strategies of defense and offense. With this plan he was able to let the great players, like Lewis Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), shine, but not to the detriment of team play.

The coach has to be able to see and develop strengths in individuals and keep them motivated through their strengths. The coach is also the keeper of the vision. Is the department fulfilling its responsibilities to the organization? Is it doing it in the way that is effective, cost efficient and producing customer satisfaction? When it needs realignment, the coach pulls the team together, poses the concerns, and lets them solve the issues.

**The Flexible Front End**

The other part of our success in “Protecting the Staff Resource” in User Services is having a flexible front end.

At least yearly we take stock of the internal stress points and the external complaints. The team collects any further information they need, then together we set about designing a new front end to our service. A very common theme is, how to do more with less. We strive for methods that teach customers to fish instead of feeding them.
Our brainstorming sessions focus on possible minor changes that could cover a majority of needs. We also try to identify infrastructure issues which would require the college to make a financial investment. We knew we could enact the minor non-budgetary changes, and we would make recommendations about the infrastructure issues.

Some minor changes can be physical: layout of offices or workspace, availability of documentation, office coverage, too many incoming phone lines - all ringing, need for hands free phone answering, stopping service of old products, just to name a few.

With our list of changes in hand, we redesign our service front end. Here is what our latest one looked like. We called it the “Rotation Model”.

**The Rotation Model** consisted of three components each done for the full day.

- **On Duty** - the consultant is assigned to help desk functions. Answering the phone, consulting, dealing with walk-in customers.

- **Research** - the consultant makes themselves un-interruptable (closed door, work elsewhere, forwarded phones). They work on research for outstanding problems, self-training, preparation for workshops or writing documentation.

- **Out Time** - the consultant schedules all office visits for hardware set up, software installations, troubleshooting, etc. This consultant also carries a radio for emergencies they could check while out on campus.

Each week starts with a staff meeting reporting about last week’s projects and this week’s out-time schedule. The consultants turn in their research projects and make exchanges on projects or people that are priority or bogging someone down. It is essential to have a weekly time set aside for communication. This structured communication is the maintenance element that makes the new model a success.

The rest of the week is spent with each of the three consultants either “On Duty”, “Research” or “Out Time”. This gives the consultants peace of mind that they can count on the needed research time to solve issues, and have the out time needed to fulfill requests. If the volume of work does not fit within this plan, then we re-look at priorities and resources.

**Follow up of Model**

Monitoring and adjusting the new front end takes place in the initial stages of implementation.

The coach has to observe and listen to the parts that are working and the parts that are stumbling blocks. Shaking these out at staff meetings is important. Typically, the staff meetings address the following issues:

- Review the plan with the team and help identify the weak spots.
• Find out why the staff member is not able to carry out the proposed model. Are they missing supplies? Do they not have the back up resources needed? Do they have the authority to make needed decisions?
• Together meet the need or discuss changes needed to the model.
• Look for sources of pressure. Are the staff members self expectations too high? They may need to hear that they can carry requests over to the next week. Is the customer demand for instant response reasonable? Are all customers this way, or a few special ones?
• Brainstorm ways to diffuse the pressure or divert their attention. What can you give them that will go a long way in customer satisfaction?
• Review your resources. Can moneys be transferred to allow you to hire a student for a short term project to make it through a crisis? Can the customer's department provide a backup computer for the one that is in repair - is someone on vacation, or out ill? Are there any faculty or staff children who would like to volunteer for the experience of exposure to the computing field? Is there any portion of the work that can be turned into an internship? Explore creative solution ideas from many campus contacts.
• Remind and hold the staff to the agreed procedures. If a staff member is "giving away" the time for research, because they feel guilty hearing the phone ring and not answering it, suggest they move to a location away from the distractions. Have the team react to the concern and suggest corrections.

There will be a magic period of time, when everything is working well, before the need for changes start creeping in. Mid-semester is a good time to make minor changes. In spring I begin the process of evaluation and reviewing needs and stressors, and brainstorming as to how we should look the following year.

**Building in the Change Mechanism**

I believe that staff will be more responsive to change if the process is a regular part of their semester and year review. When they know that they are making changes to better meet the current set of customer needs and that satisfied customers give them good feedback and make their jobs more rewarding, they will view yearly changes as a way to keep their lives sane and more fulfilling.

At the beginning of the spring semester each staff meeting should be adding to a growing list of both staff needs and customer needs. Does the staff need training in Windows 95 support before the whole campus has it? Does the help desk need training on talking a student through a dorm connection to Internet? Does the campus need a handout on upgrading Netscape from the net?

Advice should be sought from the department's larger organization as to whether the institutional goals have changed or shifted, whether funding will affect current operations or allow for growth.

The customers should be consulted as to their needs, satisfaction, suggestions.

Then there should be a house-cleaning process. What current services can be retired. Can we finally state that we are not supporting Brand X Software?
All of this fact finding provides the information to again reshape the Flexible Front End as needed. It also provides information to guide the strengthening of the pillars. It may suggest developing a new specialist, or adding training to an existing specialist.

This year we underwent a major Front End revamping. Computing merged with the Library to form Library, Information and Technology Services. User Services staff split to join with staff from other units and formed two new departments - Technology Support and Repair and Desktop Technologies.

The following are our successes from a strong Rotation Model.

**Success Stories:**

1. The Administrative Assistant was promoted to Consultant.
2. The PC Specialists was promoted to Assistant Director for Technology Support and Repair.
3. The computer repair person moved to a computing position that combined his degree in music and his work with music software.
4. A student worker was hired as a full time hardware installation staff.