Because of an ineffective management structure, the students who worked in the Bentley College Computer Lab felt a lack of direction and were often bored, apathetic, and rude to the client base as well as to each other. New direction changed the management structure, strengthened selection standards for hiring students, developed comprehensive training programs, and provided a structure of student support.
Background

The Student Computing Services Department at Bentley College faces unique challenges in equipping the Lindsay Hall Computer Lab with a customer-service focused staff. The lab is staffed completely by students who are supervised by full-time staff located in an office across the hall. Given the transient nature of the student staff, the fact that many are learning for the first time how to behave properly in an employment setting, and the technical nature of the job, we have had to develop ways to maximize their job knowledge, and to induce a strong customer service focus.

The Computer Lab is open almost 100 hours per week and has approximately 90 Windows PCs and 10 Macs. We currently run approximately 30 software packages and/or utilities on four platforms: Windows 3.1, Windows 95, Mac System 7, and VAX VMS. The lab serves the entire undergraduate and graduate population. All full-time undergraduate students at Bentley should have their own computer because the college has required all freshmen to buy a laptop for the past ten years and network access is available in all dorm rooms. Despite having ready access to their own equipment in their dorm rooms, students often come to the Computer Lab to work on assignments, check email, or work on group projects. Commuters and graduate students use the lab quite frequently as on-campus access provides more functionality than is currently available through remote access.

Prior to 1995, Student Computing Services employed approximately 40-45 students to cover the lab. The students reported to five full-time staff members: four supervisors and a manager. Because direction could come from any of the five full-time staff members, the students didn’t feel a sense of unity. There was little cohesion in the management staff and the students had little direction.

This fractured management style had a significant impact on the student lab staff. They were not trained adequately on many software packages used in the lab. Due to their lack of technical knowledge, the student staff often couldn't help the clients. Many were apathetic in their approach to the job. Rather than feel a sense of ownership when a client presented them with a software question, they’d pass the buck to the next consultant, who would respond “I don’t know” and would let the client walk away without any type of answer. A majority of the student staff rarely consulted a manual to find the solution to a problem and they had little motivation to move from behind the front desk, even when asked to perform a routine task by a full-time staff member. Finally, the pay rate in the lab was a sore spot among the students. They felt they were making as much as the student who was flipping burgers in the cafeteria but their jobs required more knowledge.

Morale of the student workers was very low and the group as a whole did not feel that they were part of a team. We had nearly disastrous conflicts among the student staff. In one instance, racial tensions had escalated to near fist-fighting. In another, communication between a supervisor and consultant had
completely broken down and the two were no longer speaking to one another.

Clearly, with the student staff feeling undervalued and underpaid, providing good customer service was nearly impossible. Even the simplest tasks were not being performed. For example, rather than being proactive in monitoring paper levels in the printers and refilling them when paper supplies ran low, the lab staff would wait for students to come up and ask them for necessary supplies. They wouldn’t periodically pick up loose paper from the workstations or otherwise clean the lab without being asked. When asked a question by a client, they rarely got up from behind the desk and were sometimes rude to clients. There was a serious perception among faculty and student clients that the lab staff knew nothing. Professors would actually tell students in their classes not to bother asking the lab staff a question because they would get no help. The full-time staff was wasting time solving routine problems in the lab that the student staff should have known how to answer. The Vice President of Information Services would attend Board of Trustee Meetings and hear negative statements from students and faculty about the lab staff. Student Computing Services had a serious problem that needed resolving.

In October of 1995 the Manager of Student Computing Services redefined positions in his area so that each full-time staff member had specific responsibilities in different areas. There was now one position which was directly responsible for hiring, firing, training, and supervising the student lab staff. The position became a job share between Elizabeth Davies and Cynthia Shaw on January 1, 1995. Although two people were in charge, it was one position to which the student staff reported. Cindy and I have extremely similar beliefs, ideas, and talents. Our management styles vary somewhat in that she tends to be more lenient where I tend to be more strict in my views. The differences have worked to both of our advantages, however, since we each respect the other’s opinion and often compromise where we disagree.

The first five months sharing the job were spent defining, developing, and, most importantly, documenting policies and procedures so that we would have solid ground for enforcing sanctions on undesirable behavior. We developed a Lab Policy Manual that is given out to each new hire and reviewed in detail with them. In the Lab, we placed a binder of procedures that we use during procedural training and for reference for the staff. Then we evaluated our existing problems with our student staff and implemented solutions to solve the problems.

We Changed the Selection Standards for Student Workers and the Position

One item that became immediately apparent was that we could improve the pool of students applying for jobs by redefining the positions and our hiring practices. We had two levels of student jobs, Consultant and Supervisor, but we had only one position grade approved through Student Employment with a pay range of $6-8. This meant the Consultant could make $6-6.99 and the Supervisor could make from $7-8. Our prior hiring practice was very simple: we hired whoever came through the door. The supply and demand for the job in the
Computer Lab ebbed and flowed enough that we were never sure we’d be able to fill our open positions, so our temptation was to grab the first twenty or so students who applied and hand them the job.

Since this did not always bear the best results, we changed our strategy. We agreed with our student staff that their jobs were too technical in nature to be lumped among the same level as a student whose primary function at their on-campus job was flipping burgers in the cafeteria. Cindy and I were requiring our students to become more competent performers and that required us to recognize their competence. With the backing of our Manager and Vice President, we worked with the Student Employment Office to regrade our student positions so that the consultant was a grade above the normal workstudy job and the supervisor was two grades above the normal workstudy job. This gave the job more desirability among students, and the number of students who applied for the job increased significantly. We announced to our student staff that they were being compensated at a higher rate of pay than other students on campus -- and that we would now expect a higher level of service from them.

We also changed our hiring strategy. Rather than hire the first person that walked through the door, we held interviews where both Cindy and I talked to the person. We gave the candidate an in-depth overview of the position and our expectations. We conferred with each other on our feelings about who would be good for the job. We checked references to see how the students performed in other jobs. By being able to interview together, we could form our opinions and share our thoughts about those we interviewed.

We looked at our per-period staffing levels. We found that we simply had too many students on hand for the amount of demand. When this happened, the student staff tended to chit-chat, wouldn’t train on software packages, and were even reluctant to get out of their seats to help anyone. By cutting the number of staff per shift, we forced the students to be more responsive because they had to be -- the demand required them to get out of their seats.

We changed the type of student we were looking for. Technical competence wasn’t the most important thing to us anymore. We offered group and self-paced training on the technical packages we supported. We needed someone who could learn these technical areas, and who could offer top notch customer service as well. We knew we had a customer service problem so this became a primary focus in the interview. Did the student have customer service experience? How had they addressed customer-related problems? What was their perception of the lab and if it was negative, how would they work to change it? We didn't mind if a student was not a Computer major; if we felt they could learn the technical aspects of the job, and they provided a high level of customer service, we were willing to hire students from all different backgrounds.

In the past, Student Computing Services full-time staff had promoted student supervisors from the consultant pool. Cindy and I decided to treat our staff as if they were in a "real job" and we opened supervisor positions to the entire consulting staff through an application and interview process. This gave everyone a chance to submit a resume and apply for the supervisory level and it
gave an incentive for the staff to work really hard during the semester. We scheduled interviews and awarded the job based on how the student did in the interview, how reliable they were, their customer service focus, and their job knowledge.

One of the most important things we did to improve the level of student staff was that we began to follow through. We now had well-documented policies and procedures and we made sure each lab staff member knew the policies and understood them. When we hired students, we told them they were on a six week "probation" and could be let go during that time if things didn’t work out. When we spotted problem behavior, we immediately addressed it and monitored the behavior for improvement. For students who survived the probation period, we developed a "three strikes and you’re out" policy. A student who didn’t follow policies would be first given an oral warning. If the problem behavior continued, the students would receive a written warning. Finally, if the problem behavior continued further, the student would be fired or if it was close enough to the end of the semester, we would choose not to rehire the student for the following semester. When we had a problem student that we decided to fire or not rehire, it sent the message to the remaining staff that we would not tolerate inadequate or inappropriate behavior. Performance improved.

We Increased Training

In addition to changing staffing pay rates and levels, we decided to expect more from our students. In turn, we would provide more. We created a three day training session which took place over Labor Day weekend for Consultants and Supervisors. The content of the training has evolved over the last couple of years and now concentrates on system changes that have occurred at the college during the summer, a review of policies and procedures, and a review of software. In addition to technical training, we give seminars on customer service, supervisory skills, communication skills, troubleshooting skills, and diversity. By offering training in customer service, communication skills, and diversity, we are helping students to become better rounded. They are better able to deal with the diverse groups of students in a more professional manner.

Bentley pays for the students’ time spent in training, all meals, and their housing costs during the training period. We have some meals catered on campus in a private room, and other times we go out to lunch or dinner at a local restaurant. The money spent on this training event is well worth the investment. Because these students are with us for three days, this training proves to be an effective team building exercise. We get to know the students better, they get to know us better, and most importantly, they get to know each other well enough to feel comfortable starting off the semester together. They feel valued and important because they know we took the time to plan a catered barbecue, or because we took them to a mid-priced restaurant for dinner. The self-esteem about their job increased dramatically.

This Labor Day training session provided us with some unplanned benefits
as well. Not only was the student staff well prepared for the onslaught of students in the lab, but we were able to pin the students down to a workable schedule for the first few weeks of the semester, which gave us a strong core crew in place for the start of school. Due to prior vacation plans or other commitments, some staff couldn’t attend the Labor Day training. For these returning students and for our new hires, we provided a similar training session on a weekend in mid-September and again in late January. This ensured that all staff received the same training. We recorded attendance at various sessions to track participation. Because of the success of this program, attendance at this training is now a requirement of working in the lab.

Because we support such a large number of software packages over multiple platforms, we couldn’t possibly provide in-depth training on every package. To supplement our group training, we require students to complete self-paced training assignments throughout the semester. These assignments come from a variety of places. We sometimes see an assignment from a professor that causes a lot of questions. We make a copy of the assignment and require our staff to complete the assignment to make sure they understand the problem areas. For other assignments, we require students to work through a tutorial book, or we make up assignments on our own. In each of these assignments, it is important that they turn in some result of their training (either hardcopy or on-line). This way we know they completed the assignment. We also seek the assistance of some of our more technical staff to hold training sessions for the rest of the lab staff. They are often in a class that requires extensive use of a specialty software package that is available in the lab. These students are an excellent resource for us to use in training the rest of the staff. It also increases their self confidence, and they display a sense of pride in their job.

**We Increased Support for Students**

The goal of our training was to make the staff more self-reliant while providing superior customer service. We created a new motto meant to capture our new customer service orientation: "Everyone Gets An Answer" (and we’ve been inclined to modify it slightly to "Everybody Gets the Right Answer.") We stress to our student staff the importance of not letting anyone leave the lab without some type of answer to a question they had. Even if we need to get back to a client at a later time, we feel it is important to give each person closure to the answer that was asked. We continually stress to the student staff the correct order in solving a problem: try on-line help, the manual, other staff members, our helpdesk database, and the full-time staff. We give them the resources they need to solve the problem.

We developed written guides and procedures to supplement training. After training, if students couldn’t remember how to load paper into the printer, there were procedural manuals available in the lab to step them through the process. We developed policy guides that clearly stated our expectations of consultants and supervisors. The students didn’t have to deal with vague policies --
everything was written down and available for their reference.

We implemented a computerized problem tracking system which is used to log any type of problem students might be having. This system is available in the lab and at the HelpDesk. Our student staff assign the problem to a particular group or person who must then ensure the problem is solved. Another use for the system is to log solutions to software problems encountered in the lab throughout the day. For example, if Professor X gave an assignment that required a student to display formulas in a cell in Excel, we wanted the problem and solution documented in the database by the lab staff so that the next shift of students who encountered the problem could query the database and find the solution easily. In concept this aspect of the database seemed like it would solve many problems. In reality, the students hate to use it because it is a text-based system and not user-friendly. We continually encourage its use, however, and hope to get better results with a graphical version which we will be implementing for the Spring of 1998.

One way we support our student staff is to recognize students who aren’t performing adequately and to work to solve the problem or let them go. We have repeatedly noticed that the outstanding students who work really hard and are positive have an immediate and dramatic effect on the staff they work with; the staff they work with begin to work equally hard. We provide positive feedback to those who are performing well. Quick e-mails or special mentions at staff meetings go a long way to improving morale. Likewise, students who sit and do nothing cause resentment in the rest of the staff. It’s up to Cindy and me, as these students’ supervisors, to support the students who are working well by “weeding out” the students who aren’t performing at higher levels.

Another way we support the students is by rewarding their hard work. At the end of the fall semester we have a pizza party and have little drawings for gifts. We have an end-of-the-year catered barbecue with whiffle ball games and Frisbees. We bring in occasional treats such as donuts on days when we ask the lab to pull out the dust cloths and really clean the lab. We also offer incentives where we can. We don’t allow our students to do homework in the lab because there are so many packages they could be training on. However, during hard-to-staff times such as finals, we relax the rule so that they can help us cover times that are needed, but can attend to their studies as well.

Cindy and I have an open door policy. The students can stop by at any time to talk with us or email us if they have concerns. We also require supervisors to write a brief report at the end of the night which indicates any problems they had. The students know that they can come to us if they have a problem and we will work with them to solve the problem.

Cindy and I are not constantly in the lab. Realistically, we don't have a lot of time to spend in the lab itself because of other commitments such as committee work, attending meetings, and performing administrative functions. Because of our absence in the lab, we rely on the student staff to provide us with feedback for evaluations on their peers. We give each lab staff member the opportunity to evaluate his or her supervisor and we ask that the supervisors evaluate the
students who work for them. These evaluations are key to knowing how well students fit, are performing, and are viewed by their peers.

The Results

In three years we have seen a significant turnaround in the student staff. They are helpful to the clients they serve, are more knowledgeable than ever before, and are often eager to help the full-time staff with special projects. A good test of our success came in the fall of 1996. This was a particularly stressful fall at the college because our network underwent major renovations and became unstable for over a month. The customer service that clients received in the lab was exceptional. We received a negative letter from a graduate student about the network problems, and in it he specifically stated how helpful everyone in the lab had been. This summer, a graduate student brought in a cake for all of the lab staff who had helped her. We’ve received compliments from faculty and staff who have called our helpdesk. These people remarked how surprised they were at the professional and courteous service they received from a student. We are hearing less often from our students that the faculty are talking disparagingly about the knowledge base of the lab staff.

We have met our goal of improved customer service, but we are always working to fine tune our operation. During the summer, we review our training sessions, policies and procedures, and other issues concerning the operation of the labs. In order to make our training successful, we need to revise our training sessions every year. The length of time a student is employed in the lab can range from one year to four years, with the average time being two years. If we are requiring these students to attend our fall training each year, we need to provide new or advanced training for them while providing basic training for our new hires. Next year we plan to hold more technical sessions concurrently in order to meet this need. Additionally, based on a suggestion from one of our student staff, we are going to include a "Stress Management" session and another on "How to Avoid Conflict."

In order to receive better customer service for those who are calling our Student Computing HelpDesk, we have created a new position of HelpDesk Consultant. Our goal is to give those students who are calling a consistent flow of information. Assigning one person to work each shift will allow the caller to be able to work through a problem with one person and not have to re-explain the situation if multiple callbacks are needed. We plan to evaluate this change at the end of the year and if we consider it successful, then we will add a new segment of training to our fall agenda.

Our biggest goal for the summer of 1998 is to create a mechanism to track our student training. With all of the training that takes place during the semesters, we need to create some type of database that will be accessible and easy to use that will help us to record the information. Since the students do a lot of training on their own we are considering some type of Notes or Access database where they could enter their own training accomplishments.
Overall we have found that the lab staff works better as a team since our changes, are willing to own problems rather than pass them off, and are willing to assist the full-time staff members with special projects. The end result has been significantly improved customer service.