

Harnessing Untapped Resources to Help Provide FREE IT Support The Office Based Consultant Program

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A Brief History of Berea

Founded in 1855 as the first interracial and co-educational college in the South, Berea College promotes understanding and kinship among all people, service to communities in Appalachia and beyond, and sustainable living practices which set an example of new ways to conserve our limited natural resources.

As Berea continues to build upon a distinctive history of 150 years of learning, labor and service, and find new ways to apply our mission (the Great Commitments) to contemporary times, we hold to our founding motto “God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth.” (Berea, History: The Berea Story)

At Berea, promising students with limited economic means receive the opportunity for a world-class education.

The support of generous donors provides each of our 1,500 students with a full-tuition scholarship, which can mean the difference between a life of unmet potential and a future full of possibilities. Friends of the College give our students the chance for a stellar liberal arts education—an opportunity they could not otherwise afford.

In addition to full-tuition scholarships, students gain real-life work experience while earning modest wages through the College’s required work program. From Berea College Crafts to Information Systems & Services, students learn, work, and serve. (Berea, Friends and Donors Home Page)

Rationale

No matter how large or small the IT department is at any school, there is never a lack of work to be done. With the growth of new technology and the exponential rate of its adoption into our society, and especially into education, the need to support this technology has grown not only in

depth, but also in urgency. For today's Faculty and Staff computer use isn't an option, but a necessity, a necessity that for many was not even fathomable during their own undergraduate years. Of course with expanding the use of technology comes the need for expanding support services as well, but can we afford to expand our staffing at the same rate as this growth? In general most IT departments have expanded their staffing at a much faster rate than other areas on the same campuses, but how long can this trend continue? Not only has the use of technology expanded, but also the expanse of different types of technology has broadened the range of support needs, which stretches the limits of what can be accomplished by each individual even further. With these realizations it is understandable that many college and university IT departments do not have the best reputations. Most technology requires not only the research and development to stay up to date, but also a great deal of work to provide that those systems remain stable and reliable. What good is a new technology if you can't count on its availability or if you don't have the opportunity to learn how to use it effectively?

Out of these needs at Berea College, grew a unique program that has both expanded support services, and brought about a closer relationship to those we serve, the Office Based Consultant program.

About the Program

In order to provide additional technology support to the College, the Office-Based Consultant program was started in July 2000. In many ways this program developed through a natural progression, in most office settings there is that one person who, through experience, training, or personality becomes known as the one to go to for help. While these are not generally recognized as such, in many ways they are the "front-line" Help Desk support. With little or no recognition and support from the IT department, these individuals fill in the gaps of our official support structures. They have a stronger connection with those that they support, more direct understanding of specific departmental software and technology needs, and a real ownership of the issues that arise. It was in recognition of these that Sandy Bolster, then Coordinator of Instructional Technology, birthed the concept of the Office Based Consultant.

As an introduction in a software manual the following scenario is given:

"Your secret is safe with us. We know you want to be the formatting expert in the office. Everyone is always asking your officemate how to take a troubled document and line up bullet points, renumber lists, and make the text wrap around the picture just right. She seems to be the only person who can get the column widths spaced to print perfectly on the handouts page. It may take her half the day to do it, but that doesn't matter, everyone loves her because she is a problem solver."
(Archilla)

Every office seems to have that one person; the guru everyone knows can answer their questions so they don't have to call the Help Desk, and the amount of support they provide is immeasurable. While these people generally receive no extra pay, have little, if any, formal training in IT support, and are adding these duties completely outside of their job description, many offices would feel crippled without them. Their reputation often exceeds that of the official IT support staff, and they are familiar with the "real work" that goes on in the office.

It was in recognizing that Berea College has many of these employees who are skilled technology users and who assist others on an informal basis, that this network of resource people was created. Office-Based Consultants provide the first contact for employees in an office, on a floor, or possibly within in an entire building. Departments/divisions determine how the office-based consultant functions within their area.

The OBCs work closely with IS&S staff to extend support across campus into individual divisions/departments on a daily basis, and offer input into planning for technology needs. The support and assistance from Office-Based Consultants results in a decrease of basic inquiries to the Help Desk, allowing the Help Desk staff to focus on more advanced issues. The Consultants are able to pass along exact information about problems and training needs to the Help Desk. If the Consultant cannot provide assistance, or is not available, the Help Desk remains available to help with questions.

The Office-Based Consultants meet each week for some of the following reasons:

- Introduction of new software packages, versions and equipment
- Training on new software, hardware, the network, and trouble shooting
- Instruction for new upgrades and patches
- Discussion of questions or computer problems raised by colleagues
- Advance notice and preparation for upcoming changes for the College

Potential Benefits of Program

Office Base Consultants are now part of the IS&S team at Berea College. They add value to our campus by contributing in the implementation of new software (whether campus wide, for individual departments or software installation on individual workstations). This past year they have been planning and training for the campus-wide upgrade to the new Microsoft Office 2007 System (Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook) This upgrade is a major change for the campus. To facilitate this change, the OBCs are being trained first, before the software is released to the rest of campus. They will then go back to their departments, and having had the option to upgrade their own machines to the new version, they will have had time to familiarize themselves with it before their departments make this change or sign up for training. Not all individuals choose to come to training but have come to rely on their OBC and will work through it on their own time with daily problems that surface.

At Berea part of the curriculum includes a labor program where students are an integral part of the employee groups in every department on campus. Every student works at least a 10-hour per week labor assignment, and this requires him or her to have access to certain data within their labor department. The supervising staff can give access to jobs by placing them in shared folders that are secure and backed up daily on our network servers. The data is available to them through the folders within the department where they work. In many cases it is the OBC that manages the work flow and training for these students, as well as staff, by showing them how to efficiently use the shared folders. This training is much easier when done one on one. The OBC in the department usually knows the data and flow of data better than the Help Desk.

Another area that the OBCs are able to help with is in the daily usage of Microsoft Office Outlook. They answer questions regarding departmental distribution lists, calendar sharing, creating appointments, etc. The local departmental OBC knows of and can respond to the personal needs of an individual in using each of these features better than even the Help Desk in some instances.

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OBCs also assist with general maintenance on local equipment, (computers, printers, fax, and scanners), evaluation of hardware and software problems prior to involving the Help Desk, running spy ware or virus scans, checking for cable disconnects, printer/copier jams, toner/paper refills on public and departmental equipment.

OBCs also provide support by doing one-on-one training within their departments on topics such as creating PDFs, adding or deleting printers, use of BANNER (Berea's campus administrative software) and NOLIJ (Berea's document imaging system, where volumes of historical information in hard copies are being scanned into electronic format.).

Many of Berea's faculty and staff work from portable computers that are often maintained (cleaning and general care) by the OBC in their department. Often times the portable computer users are presenting and will need classroom media systems set up in advance. Once again the OBC will make sure the room is ready, the software needed for this presentation is in place and will coordinate the set up of the presentation for the department presenters.

Each department and person is also responsible for backups of their own hardware to campus server space. Training OBCs to promote this in their own department has saved a lot of frustration. When end-users experience hard drive failures or other problems the OBC will be able to assist in retrieving their files from the server.

Wireless access to Berea's campus network varies on campus and is available only in certain areas. However, the hardware does come installed on all new equipment. Therefore the OBC once again is up on the latest so he/she can communicate this info as needed to the department and provide support with how to connect.

Training

While much of the description of the OBC program so far has focused on the benefits to the IT department, the success of the program depends also on the benefits to the individual OBCs and their departments as well. Additional Training, prioritized support, and recognition of service are integral parts of making this program a success.

Since the OBCs are not directly employed by IS&S compensation through pay and benefits is mainly out of our control. For this reason it is essential that the additional support and recognition given is provided in such a way that the participants see the benefits in the program. It is very helpful if departments can recognize the additional support they are receiving and can incorporate these things into job descriptions, and/or recognize the contributions the program makes when considering salary.

Training seems to be the biggest draw to this program. Many who find themselves in this position informally recognize that they are not necessarily more qualified to answer their coworker's questions, and they would like to be better prepared when asked. At the core of the OBC program is training. All OBCs are trained in standard campus software, and are provided with additional manuals and support materials as they are available.

Beyond training in the basic software, it is helpful to have some insight into the operating systems that keep our computers running. While most general computer users focus on applica-

tions, the OBCs are trained on features of the Operating systems so they can also assist with troubleshooting. While this knowledge may seem basic to a technician, it is invaluable and provides not only a reduction in Help Desk requests, but also a knowledgeable assistant in the office that is able to assist with troubleshooting over the phone or by email. With this basic knowledge and a little guidance, a great number of Help Desk requests are quickly resolved and removed from the technician's workload.

One easy way to recognize and measure the progress of the OBCs is through certifications and proficiencies. Whether it is through official certifications like MOS/MOUS or through home-grown proficiency measurements, providing some type of certification and recognition of the level of expertise that has been achieved shows both strength in the individual and the program. Berea certified many OBCs through exercises written in house to demonstrate their knowledge of the software, as well as provided access to MOS/MOUS testing as an industry standard measurement.

Round Tables

One aspect of the weekly OBC meetings that has grown into a wonderful help is the roundtable discussions. Sometimes planned, but often spontaneous (usurping other plans at times) these discussions provide open dialogue on current projects, new technologies, interesting or difficult problems that have arisen. Roundtable discussions happen frequently in our weekly meetings. It's at these times that this program really shines.

It is rare that a problem comes up to which at least one of the OBCs does not have some insight, and a solution is found. Many times these solutions draw on features that are unknown to even IS&S staff! Of course many times there are multiple solutions to a problem, which also allows for some discussion of best practices and the strengths and weaknesses of each solution.

While these discussions are frequent to the weekly OBC meetings, this cooperative effort is not limited to those times. Through an OBC mailing list in the email system, questions are often spread through the group. Questions or concerns are addressed in this manner, resolving problems between meetings, as well as at times providing ideas for discussion or training for the next meeting.

Software Deployment

As we all know, each time a software company provides a new version, it can be a disruption. A lot of work is required to train on the new version, and there are many questions as everyone finds and familiarizes themselves with the new features.

The OBC program has provided a great transition for such times. The most major upgrades in the past have shown the benefits of this program. Upgrades to the Operating system, or to the Microsoft Office System seem to be the ones that effect most people on campus. For each of the upgrades to Windows XP, Office 2000, 2003, and now 2007 the OBCs have taken the leap to the new version ahead of the rest of campus (with the exception of IS&S of course). They have helped in evaluating training and resource materials. They point out areas that they think will be difficult changes and need specific attention. The OBCs field many of the questions as the software is rolled out to the rest of campus.

Glitches, Patches and Errors

The entire Berea Campus benefits from the overall Office Based Consultants Program. One example is a battery recall from Dell last year. The OBCs were trained on how to look up the batteries' codes on the replacement list and mark off names with a date and time stamp showing each person's computer that was cleared or that needed to be replaced. This saved IS&S many hours that would have been a technician's time.

The Day Light Savings Time Patch was another example of the Office Base Consultant Program helping Berea's IS&S technicians to plan. They made sure that the patch was installed and followed up to make sure it worked. Other examples might include planned rollouts of new spam control and virus protection systems, converged messaging (Callpilot), Voice over IP, Video Streaming, and Wireless network access. OBCs are the first wave of customers that evaluate the full impact of these new technologies on their particular operations. Network operations view the OBCs as an integral part of the deployment cycle as they roll out new infrastructure that impacts their clients. This ensures the capabilities of our new technologies are fully applied in a way that meets customer needs. The OBCs help create the bridge from installation to effective application of the technologies. A specific example of this is getting the word out on the features of Berea's new spam control system that allows faculty and staff to customize how spam is managed in their individual email boxes. If the OBCs are used effectively in the deployment cycle, it is possible to leverage new capabilities rather than attempt to use new systems with outdated understanding of how they work. This approach creates a venue for network operations management of voice, data and server technologies. This improves the connection with customers and maximizes the impact of their work.

The OBCs often times provide feedback, giving us information early on that informs the IT department. One issue that escaped our attention was on an order of new laptops for our student laptop program. The laptops were ordered, received and distributed to students, but when students started to use them in the Foreign Language Lab area there were NO internal microphones on that model. Dell, the manufacturer, had just stopped including them but had not notified their customers, nor had we realized the importance of this feature. This was a problem for both the Music Department and Foreign Languages who had already begun to rely on this feature. Through feedback from the OBCs we were made aware of the situation, and we were able to secure some external microphones for those departments, as well as make the needed adjustments on future orders.

The OBCs are usually among the first that are asked to proofread new documentation prior to its publishing and distribution on campus. An example of this was implementation of a new backup system. The OBCs were involved in helping to point out changes that made it easier to use, such as making fewer buttons to click. They also pointed out mistakes or confusing wording in the published instructions prior to their release to the entire campus. They also have been instrumental in helping to restructure the folders on Berea's file-sharing servers making them simpler to follow and understand, and also customizing them to meet the needs of their departments.

Each year as we plan to do our Berea College Campus Inventory on hardware, including computers, printers, fax machines, scanners and other peripherals, OBCs get involved. The IT department provides a list of the equipment in their departments. OBCs can then take the list and

compare the current equipment to the list and write in anything that is not correct then give it back to IT for reconciliation. The same holds true for replenishment of older/obsolete equipment. Each department has to make decisions on replacing or upgrading equipment. While the responsibility to request new equipment generally falls to the Department head, the OBC usually has a better understanding of the technology itself, and can be an invaluable resource to them. In addition, the OBCs usually know the equipment needs better than the IT department and can give recommendations on problematic equipment and often the age of the equipment. This is a very large job for the department head and the IT department so each contribution from the OBC is greatly appreciated. As personal liaisons they help bind together the relationships between the department and IT personnel.

Feedback

The collaboration between IS&S and the OBCs is instrumental in assisting to train the staff and students within their departments. They are also a great resource to IS&S in the feedback they provide to us. One example of this is using shared folders on a server. Due to some security issues it became necessary to restructure the folder hierarchy of the main campus file-sharing servers. The scope of use from department to department could be very different, and any restructuring needed to take into account the various uses and needs in each department. Through the OBCs a good cross section of campus and the various needs was provided, and a much stronger solution could be obtained. This has proven true with other situations as well, such as the selection of a new email system a few years ago.

The OBC can give feedback from within the department regarding many of their needs and also makes it is much easier for IS&S to communicate to the department through one person instead of several. In a department of 45 individual employees, it is preferred to have one person that really knows the business and staff working with the IS&S department.

The feedback provided to IS&S as well as the discussions that come from these times do provide a much closer relationship between IS&S Staff and the OBCs. Their understanding and involvement in new initiatives has provided a strength and confidence in these decisions that is immeasurable. Having more ownership in the decisions, and buy-in to changes that are made make difficult transitions and upgrades much easier on everyone.

Technology Liaisons

A more recent change to the OBC program was the creation of a sub-group called the Technology Liaisons. The time commitment required to attend weekly meetings and participate in this program can sometimes be an added stress to an already full schedule. The success of this type of program really falls on the commitment of the individuals involved. A sub-group of the OBCs was formed in 2005 allowing for those that wished to continue to work in keeping the lines of communication open, but could not continue to commit to the weekly meetings to continue with the training and more day-to-day work involved with the program. Technology Liaisons continue to serve as the primary contact for their department, and work closely with IS&S to address needs they have, but do not attend the weekly meetings.

While this option is not the ideal situation, and much of the feedback, training and relationships that have created such a success are lost, it is easier on those that just can't get the out of office

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time. This has also benefited the group as a whole as the remaining OBCs who are able to attend have less repetition in the meetings and more continuity of training.

Is it really free?

To be completely honest, this program has extended the reach of the IS&S department beyond what staffing budgets allow. The only real expense has been time, but it is important not to take the OBCs for granted. Spending a little on them can go a long way. Berea College has provided third party software manuals for core software packages to each OBC, and have given appreciation gifts (USB flash drives) to active participants to help them in their work. They are encouraged to add OBC job responsibilities to their job descriptions so that aspect can be considered when salaries are evaluated. So no, it's not completely free, but an amazing opportunity that should not be overlooked.

Outside the business realm

While this may not be a main business goal of a program of this type, it is important to also recognize the heart of this group. Not only has this random gathering of colleagues grown as a team but also a community. Over the past few years members of this group have went through very trying times in their personal lives, death of close family members, battles with illnesses, etc., and the support and friendship that has developed between them is amazing. This in itself was never planned as a part of this program but is a great testimony to the strength that can be accomplished when we stand together.

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