

Transforming the Student Employment Experience at St. John's University

By Lillian Dotolo

A quality education and experiential learning both contribute to a student's total college experience. Opportunities made available through on-campus student employment and internships are excellent ways to positively impact the student experience and increase the return on investment made by students and their families. A positive student employment experience not only assists in student retention, it provides meaningful opportunities for career development and job readiness by giving students a meaningful on-campus work experience where they learn skills that will translate to a future career. In support of St. John's University's number one strategic priority — to ensure student success — the office of human resources has been working over the past two years to drive initiatives to impact student success within the area of student employment.

With around 1,600 student workers employed annually by St. John's, the opportunities for human resources to impact career preparation were everywhere. HR's approach was four-pronged — to shift the culture of student worker supervision to a proactive, coaching-based model (supervisory practices at the time focused more on getting tasks done than on providing student workers with developmental coaching and real-world experiences that they could connect to their professional careers); to engage departments campus-wide in creating more internal academic internships and job opportunities for students; to implement a student worker recognition program as a means of both motivating student employees and honoring outstanding performance; and to automate the student worker employment process.

Equipping Supervisors to Effectively Manage Student Workers

Supervising student workers requires more than delegation — it requires mentoring, direct communication and ongoing guidance. But many of our supervisors had not had the opportunity to practice this kind of coaching-based supervision model. To address this, HR's training and development team launched several new training

programs for managers of student workers. Training topics include defining the job, orientation/onboarding, assigning work, coaching and providing feedback and identifying and responding to student workers in distress. With help from career services, HR also developed an online supervisor's toolkit, which contains information and resources around job descriptions, templates, interview guides, competencies, evaluation sheets and coaching tips.

Additionally, HR revised and updated its existing *Supervisor's Guide to Managing Student Workers* publication, which now serves as a comprehensive guide for managers and includes everything from pre-hire activities to resources, toolkits, recommended training programs, policies and procedures, all positioned within the university's strategic framework and direction.

Creating More Opportunities for Student Workers

In an effort to encourage departments to utilize student interns wherever they can feasibly do so, HR developed and distributed to internship coordinators across campus a how-to guide and presentation on how and why departments should host internships. HR also partners with career services and the office of community relations to host an annual on-campus student employment fair. In just four years, the event has grown from 30 participating departments and 440 students to 49 departments, 14 local businesses and nearly 900 students and has expanded to include internship opportunities as well as student worker and work-study positions. As a result of the most recent event, 243 students obtained a job or an internship on campus.

HR and career services also partnered to present a session open to the entire campus community on the responsibility that all employees have to help prepare students for employment after graduation. Additionally, HR recently hosted a lunch-n-learn for supervisors of student workers to share the progress that has been made on these initiatives and to brainstorm additional ideas around ways to continue to equip students to enter the workforce.

Recognizing Student Workers Who Go Above and Beyond

This past academic year, HR introduced Students Honored in Employment (SHinE), a new program to recognize outstanding student workers. The idea for this award program came about in 2013 when the HR department was deciding how best to utilize award money it had received as a result of being selected as the recipient of the CUPA-HR Eastern Region's Excellence in HR Practices Award. Since the department received the award for its implementation of an automated student worker employment process, HR felt that students should be the direct beneficiaries of the award money.

The program recognizes students for outstanding contributions and achievements in the workplace through a competitive nomination and selection process. The program aims to motivate student workers to take initiative and strive for excellence while reinforcing qualities that are important for success in any career. Student workers are nominated by their supervisors and entries are evaluated by a cross-functional selection committee.

In its inaugural year, 82 student workers were nominated, 12 were selected as semi-finalists and four individuals received the 2015 SHinE Award. Award recipients received a recognition plaque, a \$500 check and congratulatory letters from both the university president and the chief HR officer. A luncheon ceremony was held during National Student Employment Week to honor award recipients and semi-finalists, with their supervisors and university leaders in attendance.

Automating the Student Worker Employment Process

Three years ago, St. John's HRIS unit implemented an automated student worker hiring and employment process designed to simplify the student job search, streamline application and hiring, reduce paperwork and errors, increase communication throughout the process, and increase convenience for students, hiring managers and HR staff.

Whereas the old process required students to physically come to the HR office to apply for student employment positions, after which HR would make copies of the application and send it to various hiring managers (sometimes resulting in application delays and lost or misplaced applications), the new process offers online employment application, online tracking of applications


and personnel change forms, e-mail alerts to both students and hiring managers throughout the process, and has cut hiring time by two days. Post-employment paperwork has been reduced by 70 percent and more than 40,000 pieces of paper generated annually during the student hiring process have been eliminated.

In addition, HR migrated student employee records to electronic files and scanned in all remaining paper documents. Now, all student employment files are accessible via the HRIS system with no more need for paper filing or storage. Through a partnership with the provost's office, a similar process was rolled out for graduate assistants this past fall.

Outcomes

The culture is shifting at St. John's as it relates to student employment. Employees now regard work study as a key component of a student's total experience, acknowledging that the university has a responsibility to provide not only quality academics but quality experiential learning as well. As more and more individuals across campus realize the attributes that student employees bring to the university as a whole as well as to their own teams and departments, more and more opportunities are being created for St. John's students to gain valuable work experience on campus.

The statistics seem to show that these efforts are paying off. A survey of 2014 St. John's graduates showed that within six months of graduation, 93.2 percent were in graduate school, employed full-time, or both (up from 80 percent in 2010). The university has also gained national recognition for its student employment initiatives. In addition to the aforementioned CUPA-HR award, earlier this year the university was named as the recipient of the National Association of Colleges and Employers' Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Award for its efforts to provide economically-disadvantaged students with development opportunities and career-oriented preparation.

And with its focus on improving the student employment experience and process, HR has been able to contribute in a concrete way to student success at St. John's. 

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