Abstract

Most students leave high school having logged many hours on computers, but having little proficiency with applications required for their college courses and future careers. This paper will describe the START (Student Technical, Application, and Resource Training) program at LSU. This program was developed to help students increase their technical fluency. This paper will also discuss the services the program offers to LSU students, how these services were created and funded, the obstacles encountered with the program's implementation and the program's day-to-day management.

Introduction

The START program at Louisiana State University offers an opportunity for students to learn technical computing skills in order to improve their performance in their classes, in their jobs, and in their future careers. Over the past three years, the START program has made many strides in helping the students obtain the skills they need to succeed in the highly technical work force primarily through workshops, seminars, and one-on-one assistance. The START program offers both software application and technical training, both of which are heavily utilized by students.

How the Program Began

The START Program began as a pilot in the fall of 2000 as a collaborative effort between the Office of Computing Services Technology Support Division, which offers training for faculty and staff, and the Center for Academic Success, a unit of University College in the Division of Student Life and Academic Services. The LSU Student Technology Fee Committee joined as a collaborator by providing funding for the program on a trial basis in the spring of 2001 and eventually extended that primary funding into a three-year period. The program was recently appropriated an additional three years of funding by the University’s Student Technology Fee Committee.
The Program’s Structure

The START program consists of two tracks: Track I - Software Applications Training and Track II – Technical Training. Track I offers workshops in MS Office, web design and programming applications. Track I classes are offered continuously throughout the semester (see: www.lsu.edu/start for more information). Track II offers more advanced, technical classes dealing with operating systems, networking, and more. Track II classes are offered as one week seminars between semesters.

The START program has its own web site (www.lsu.edu/start) and database to inform students and to keep track of student attendance. Students can obtain a certificate online that displays a list of courses they have attended. They may use this certificate to show instructors, organizations or employers the courses they have attended. The program has received compliments and interest by visitors from various institutions.

Track I – The Applications Track

The software applications portion of the program has expanded significantly since its funding began in the spring of 2001.

The program in its first three years:

- Increased from 6 to 10 part-time student trainers
- Hired two part-time graduate assistants
- Increased from 87 to over 200 separate courses offered per semester
- Expanded its offerings from 14 to 18 types of software applications courses
- Began offering general applications tutoring and resource checkout and special request courses for groups and classes on campus.

The trainers for Track I are all LSU students who primarily major in Information Systems and Decision Sciences, Computer Science and Graphic Design. The START program is providing these students with excellent work experience and mentoring in their fields of study. The AITP (Association of Information Technology Professionals), other student organizations, and several LSU instructors recommend their students take START courses to increase their technological proficiency.

Courses offered are generally the most popular office suite and web design software on the market - software almost every student will come into contact with in their daily careers. Course offerings are dependent on student feedback and on the availability of student instructors possessing appropriate skills. START web design courses have generally been the most popular. Content for many of these courses is purchased from an outside vendor, but much of it is developed in-house.

The trainers are put into teams according to their skill set when they are hired and are assigned to a graduate assistant who serves as their team leader. The team leader provides them with training and assistance and holds weekly meetings where they provide mentoring for the trainers.

As an extension of our classes, the program offers one-on-one tutoring to students in software applications and training resource materials to help students further their knowledge. The program also provides workshops upon request for groups of students or for the students of faculty.
Track I - Program Obstacles

At the program’s inception the constraints were obtaining skilled workers, professional resources, lack of a designated training facility, and a lack of the most up-to-date software for trainers with which to practice and provide one-on-one tutoring for students. Obtaining skilled workers was difficult because very few students with appropriate skills exist, and ones that do are generally better paid in off campus jobs. The Office of Computing Services permitted the Track I program to use a computer classroom to hold all of its classes in the first year; however, there were several problems with this site. The site was far from the program manager’s office and from where the student trainers trained, making it difficult to observe and assist trainers. The manager had no control over the classroom or its maintenance. The program had the classroom from 2:00-9:00 p.m. which also caused problems. The scheduling of student trainers of varying skill levels and with various academic schedules into a small block of time was trying, and this limited time frame reduced the number of courses that could be offered. Additionally, the amount of time the program took to manage was a full-time job.

These obstacles were handled on an individual basis. The Track I program manager wrote a separate grant to the Student Tech Fee Committee to fund the building of a designated classroom for the program and wrote a letter to the Tech Fee requesting a reappropriation of funds to hire two graduate assistants to help with the day-to-day management of the program. The Office of Computing Services worked with the Student Tech Fee Committee to provide the most up-to-date software for all campus labs.

Track II – The Technical Track

The technical track offers an intense one-week seminar between semesters that students must attend each day and pass examinations to test their technical knowledge in order to receive a certificate of completion. Students may register on line to compete for a place in the workshop. The Office of Computing Services’ professional staff volunteer their time to teach these courses. These classes are coordinated and held at the Office of Computing Services by the Track II program manager. The content for this segment includes: Customer Service, Maintaining and troubleshooting PCs, Networking and Operating Systems, and Linux. A new segment will be added in the near future in order to train students for the Microsoft MCDST (Microsoft Certified Desktop Support Technician) Certification.

Track II – Program Obstacles

Resources and space are limited so only 20 students can be accommodated for each one-week session. Unfortunately, due to the space and resource constraints, many students have had to be turned away. The program will be utilizing a larger classroom that will accommodate more students in the upcoming semesters. Additionally, it has been difficult to coordinate the volunteer professional staff members to teach segments of the program when they already have a full workload.

Keys to a Successful Program

The Track I program manager developed a comprehensive advertising plan the program’s first semester in operation and continues to expand this plan each semester to inform students about the program’s existence. Most of them have come to us after seeing advertisements on the University’s web application PAWS (Personal Access Web Services) or hearing about our program from a teacher or friend, but many still do not know about us. We are constantly trying to think of new and better ways to connect with students and ways to better serve student needs. Hiring students who are dependable, willing to take on the many responsibilities of a trainer, and who work well with people is crucial to the program’s success. Mentoring these student trainers to help them achieve is also imperative for program success. Student wages are the program’s largest cost. There are various ways that a program can obtain funding: employing work-study students, writing grants, or finding corporate
sponsors. Program managers must keep statistics and good records in order to maintain funding and to make continuous improvements. Student feedback is heavily relied upon to make constructive program changes.

Resources

START web site (www LSU.edu/start)
The Center for Academic Success Web site (www cas LSU.edu)
The Office of Computing Services Web site (www ocs LSU.edu)
Student Technology Fee Web site (www LSU.edu/techfee)