Case Study of Connections NOW™

Reading Area Community College: Serving a larger purpose
As a two-year institution, Reading Area Community College (RACC) in Reading, Pennsylvania, sees a lot of student turnover, especially in its work-study program. With students coming and going so often, it has historically been difficult to find dedicated student workers and to ensure quality customer service around campus. To address these issues, the college redesigned its work-study program in the 1990s to enhance students’ academic experience with practical work experience in a positive and supportive learning environment. This redesign created the competitive work-study environment that RACC still has today.

In order to get a work-study position, RACC students have to apply with a resume and then interview for their desired position, whereas at most institutions, students are simply assigned to a work-study job with little or no consideration for their interests or skills. This application and interview process resulted in slightly less turn-over as students were happier in their work-study placements. But something was still missing—customer service.

“Customer service is number one,” says Kim Livingood, work-study coordinator at RACC. “Someone’s first impression of the school is everything. Without good customer service, we could lose potential students. Students and staff needed to understand the importance of being professional, friendly, and stepping into someone else’s shoes.” So Reading began searching for a program that would help them meet these goals and get results.

The college wanted a versatile customer service program that could be used across campus with all work-study positions. Ben Rosenberger, director of financial aid and the registrar, empowered student workers to conduct the research into online training systems and the winning program, Noel-Levitz’s Connections NOW, was no surprise.

“The choice to work with Noel-Levitz was easy,” says Rosenberger. “They know what’s important and they know higher education. They’re a different kind of consulting firm. Everything they do is quality. The material is simple to use and always relevant.”

Connections NOW is an interactive, Web-based training curriculum that strengthens customer service, builds teamwork, and increases customer satisfaction. RACC is using Connections NOW to empower students with the customer service knowledge necessary for success in their campus jobs, while also providing them with valuable, professional training that will continue to help them grow in their future careers. The program has typically been used by colleges and universities to train campus staff members in quality service. Reading Area Community College is the first campus to use the program to instead train student workers to not only provide more value to work-study participants, but also to raise the level of service quality on campus in general.

“When service is not up to par on a campus, work-study students tend to be easy targets to blame,” explains Rosenberger. “I like Connections NOW because it produces customer-service-minded employees and helps combat the perception that student workers are the problem, while also being true to the mission of our work-study program.”
Student worker Owen Reitenauer, who assists Rosenberger and Livingood with Connections NOW training implementation, was the first person to go through the training on the RACC campus. As the “guinea pig,” Owen got the opportunity to provide feedback on the training. He also kept track of the time it took him to thoroughly participate in and complete each module in order to establish a standard for student training.

“I really liked the online training modules—they directly relate to situations you experience on campus in your work-study job,” Reitenauer says of the experience.

Livingood facilitates the testing to students entering the work-study program. After a student has qualified for work-study, completed a search of available positions, submitted a resume, been interviewed and hired for a position, they next go through orientation. First, students review the handbook guidelines for all campus positions and receive training for their specific job. Then, before they can start working, they must complete Connections NOW training on one of the computers in the work-study office, which takes about five hours when completed thoroughly. Students can do it all in one sitting or split it up into smaller chunks of time, depending on their schedule. It may seem like a large commitment, but it is apparent that the training is producing results. Fall evaluations for work-study students were very good and Livingood expects to see the performance level rise even more in the future.

Success is clear in other ways as well: There is less turn-over in work-study positions, students are enjoying what they do, and they are eager to learn more.

“Not many schools do work-study the way we do,” says Livingood. “Most don’t utilize work-study students to their full potential. We rely on them, depend on them, and hold them to the same expectations that we hold ourselves. Their job is treated like a real job and the camaraderie and value they get out of it is so worthwhile. Through work-study and Connections NOW, they are developing job skills for life.”

In fact, RACC has a high percentage of students who excel in their work-study positions and enjoy them so much that after graduation, they go on to work in higher education at another institution, and many times even in the same office or discipline in which they did work-study at RACC. Livingood herself was a work-study student in the Admissions Office before graduating and being hired full-time for her current position as work-study coordinator.

Connections NOW has been so successful and popular, Rosenberger notes that “Kim might have to start coordinating training for all students who work on campus, not just in work-study, because Connections NOW has just worked out so well.”

As the foundation to any successful business operation, professional and quality service is worth the investment.

“If a campus wants to take customer service seriously, Connections NOW is the way to go,” says Rosenberger.

The training has brought a face-lift to the campus atmosphere at RACC and a new standard of professionalism is now expected of students by both work-study supervisors and students themselves. The bar has been raised, and students are rising to the occasion and building skills for life.