Teaching our Customers to help themselves: 
The Resource Desk as the next step in the evolution of the Help Desk environment

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ABSTRACT
In the beginning Help Desk support was directed towards Mainframe Programming, which included interpreting error messages and debugging JCL. Our focus today is on providing support for a multitude of software, including presentation software and equipment, as well as web page design and email support. The Student Computing Center at Texas A & M University has over 500 PCs with 24 hour access during the week. Three classrooms with state of the art Proxima Projectors are available to the students and faculty for use. In providing support for our customers we walk the very thin line of academic dishonesty. One way to avoid stepping over that line is to help our customers learn to help themselves by using on line help, manuals and handouts. This is an evolving process of educating our customers and our staff. To help facilitate this evolution in the help desk environment we have implemented a Resource Desk, a stand-alone area in the lab, which provides our customers with handouts, manuals and equipment for check out and support. This paper will outline the evolution of our change in support focus, as well as the development and implementation of our Resource Desk.

Keywords
Resource Desk, Help Desk.

1. INTRODUCTION
Help Desk support is a constantly evolving process. As new technology (both hardware and software) enters the mainstream and makes its way into the college and university setting, the Help Desk must mobilize to support it with documentation (manuals and handouts), training, and one on one support.

The Help Desk in a college or university setting is unique in that an additional goal or purpose is to support the learning environment. We have a responsibility to provide support that enhances the learning experience and does not violate Academic Standards.

In the beginning Help Desk support was directed for the most part at Mainframe Programming, interpreting error messages and debugging JCL and code. A clear line could be drawn as to what “help” could be provided. Help Desk workers were not to write student’s programs or code. Our customers often had computer experience in programming languages as well as having an understanding of the underlying technology they were using.

Since the availability of personal computers has increased in computing labs at colleges and universities, the Help Desk’s customers, their needs, and their expectations have changed. We now need to offer support for a multitude of software products and work with customers with varying levels of computer experience.

2. NEW QUESTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS
Help Desk workers must now support a multitude of software packages in the college or university lab setting. Often times specialty software is provided by instructors in the form of courseware which also requires support in the lab. Customer’s expectations of what “help” they will find at the Help Desk over the years has changed. Many expect one on one tutoring or help for their homework assignments. Drawing that fine line of what “help” can be provided has become harder. If we are not careful at some point we cross over the line of “help” into doing or writing their homework for them.

3. THE NEED FOR CHANGE
In the fall of 1999 we realized that the next step needed to be taken in the evolution of our Help Desk. We needed a space for more resources, such as manuals, handouts, and peripheral equipment for check out. We also needed a new approach to meeting our customers needs.

We began an intensive reorganization of our handouts, updating and creating new ones as needed. We made our handouts web page more user friendly. Customers were able to easily find the handout they needed and either read it online or print the material.

In the past we had used in house-handouts, “cheat sheets”, to allow our student workers to be able to help with specific programs we were seeing in the lab. These helped bring each student worker up to speed and allowed us the ability to help with specific projects. Unfortunately, word of our “cheat sheets” had
leaked out. Students were actually coming into the Help Desk asking for their own copy to use. They became angry when they found out they had to write their Access program first and the “cheat sheet” was for checking their progress.

Students expected one on one tutoring for material they had missed by not going to class or not taking notes if in class. There was also the expectation that any software (whether available in the lab or merely accessible from the lab machines) was to be supported. The expectation of “help” came to include any help that was needed.

We weren’t doing our customers any favors by writing their programs, teaching them what they were supposed to have learned in class, or babysitting them through their assignments. We came to realize we needed to teach them to help themselves. Our Resource Desk was born.

4. THE RESOURCE DESK

4.1 The Setting

The Student Computing Center at Texas A & M University has over 500 PCs with 24 hour access during the week. We also have three classrooms with state of the art Proxima Projectors that are available to the students and faculty for use. Each floor of our two- storied facility has a print room and a traditional Help Desk area.

On the first floor just off of the print room is a smaller room. It has a long counter top in front, as well as two shelving units and several drawers for storage. The counter top provides a point of contact to the student worker stationed there by our customers. We also provide basic office supplies for our customers to use (paper cutter, stapler, tape, etc.).

4.2 Staffing

Student workers are stationed at the Resource Desk from 8 AM to 8 PM, Monday through Friday. They are responsible for answering questions, checking out peripheral equipment and manuals, providing handouts and demonstrating the use of online resources. While Help Desk staff often are required to leave the Help Desk to go out onto the floor to help our customers, the Resource Desk staff are required to stay on station.

4.3 Philosophy

The philosophy of the Resource Desk is different from our traditional Help Desk. While Resource Desk workers do many of the same things the Help Desk worker does such as providing handouts and manuals to help answer customer’s questions. They also show how the Internet can be used as a resource, directing customers to web pages (created in house or on outside servers) for help. They teach customers how to use the on line help with in many of the software packages available in the lab. They are proactive in teaching our customers how to help themselves.

Some of this philosophy has been implemented in our traditional Help Desk. We are no longer using “cheat sheets” and are now teaching our customers at both the Help Desk and the Resource Desk how to use on line help and handouts, as well as refer to their class notes.

5. RESULTS

The process of re-educating our staff as well as our customers has not been an easy one. Often times it is easier to just go out and “fix the problem”. Breaking the habits of automatically reaching for a customer’s mouse to fix it for them, or simply telling them what to do with out explaining why or how it works has been hard. Customers also are resistant to the change. We still get requests for the “cheat sheets”, and customers will quickly relinquish their PC to a Help Desk worker while receiving help.

The Resource Desk will not completely replace the need for the traditional Help Desk worker who goes out on the floor of the lab to help customers. However many customers are repeat visitors to the Resource Desk, checking out manuals, picking up handouts and appreciating the fact that they in fact can help themselves.