

SACUBO Best Practices Competition: The East Carolina University Certification Assistance Program

Institutional Background:

East Carolina University (ECU), located in Greenville, North Carolina and founded in 1907, is a doctoral research public institution. ECU offers a variety of academic programs from art and education to business and medicine. The 2001 fall enrollment included 14,886 undergraduate students, 2,666 graduate students and 299 professional degree students. ECU employs a total of 1,649 full-time equivalent faculty and non-teaching professionals and employs 2,521 full-time equivalent administrative and facilities support staff.

The Department of Information Technology and Computing Services (ITCS) is the central IT department for ECU. ITCS services 3,500 faculty and staff workstations, 240 servers, and 10,000 network nodes. Currently, ITCS employs a total of 176 full-time equivalent employees. A total of 45 of ITCS's employees are computer consultants or systems programmers.

Program Overview:

In competitive labor markets, colleges and universities are often at a disadvantage to compete with the higher salaries offered by private sector employers. Given the external competition colleges and universities face, it is critical for institutions to develop alternative and innovate methods to attract and improve skilled Information Technology

(IT) professionals. ECU's Department of Human Resources worked cooperatively with the Department of Information Technology and Computing Services to develop a training program to enhance recruitment and retention efforts of skilled IT professionals. ECU realized that a need existed to provide funding to interested employees that went above and beyond the training dollars set aside to fund regular in-service training. The Certification Assistance Program (CAP) was created as a result of this joint recruitment and retention effort. The CAP provides a mechanism for ECU to "grow" and retain subject matter experts within the organization.

The Certification Assistance Program (CAP) is a voluntary program in which employees can apply through their departments if they are interested in participating in the program. It is designed to attract, develop and retain IT professionals at East Carolina University. The CAP offers funding assistance to selected employees to obtain the additional training derived from professional certifications and licenses that are (1) over and above those minimally required for the position, (2) directly relevant to the participant's job duties and (3) highly beneficial to the department. The CAP is supplemental to on-going training and development programs offered to employees at East Carolina University. This program will allow the University to remain competitive and meet increasing market demands created by other universities and employers in the private sector.

Participant Eligibility Requirements:

Eligibility for funding under the CAP is based on the needs of the employee's department, the availability of funding, the employee's skill set and the employee's

career goals. The employee's department head makes eligibility decision on the basis of the direct benefits to the department. Recommendations for participation in CAP are forwarded to the Division Head. All decisions made by the Division Head relative to an employee's participation in the CAP are final. Such decisions are dependent upon University needs, available funding and changing market demands. Eligibility decisions regarding participation in this program are not grievable.

Employee Commitment & Development Plan:

The commitment of the employees participating in the CAP is critical to the overall success of the program. Prior to receiving approval of funding for the program, participants must complete a Commitment & Development Plan. The Commitment & Development Plan outlines the following information:

- 1) A description of the certification program the CAP funds will support.
- 2) A list of the goals and objectives the employee has relative to the designated certification/licensure program.
- 3) A completion timeline for the certification/licensure program.
- 4) A description of how the certification benefits/supports strategic goals of the employee's sponsoring department.
- 5) A detailed listing of program expenses to include:
 - a) Registration fees
 - b) Cost of instructional materials
 - c) Certification/licensure examination fees (if applicable)

- d) Cost of travel, lodging and subsistence (if absolutely necessary)
- 6) Cost of ongoing licensure will be the employee's personal responsibility.

Terms and Conditions of the CAP:

Protecting the university's investment of training dollars provided to employees for specialized professional development is a key component of the CAP. It is critical that employees share responsibility for the success of the CAP. Employees participating in the CAP enter into a binding agreement with East Carolina University. The terms and condition of this agreement are outlined in a Commitment and Development Plan. The Commitment and Development Plan specifies:

- 1) An employee who does not fulfill the requirements of the certification or licensure program within specified timelines will immediately reimburse the University for 100 percent of the cost incurred on behalf of the employee.
- 2) An employee who leaves the University before the end of the first twelve months of commitment after receiving the specified certification or license must reimburse the University for 100% of the cost incurred as a result of the employee's participation in the CAP.
- 3) An employee who leaves the University for any reason between thirteen and twenty-four months after obtaining the certification or license must reimburse the University for 50% of the cost of training.

- 4) An employee who leaves employment as a result of disciplinary action or as a result of a reduction in force (RIF), are not required to reimburse East Carolina University for any of the funds received under the CAP.
- 5) Any of the above cost reimbursements remaining unpaid when an employee terminates employment are collected using established University collection processes.

On-Going Professional Development:

Upon completion of the certification or licensure program, the participants must demonstrate a willingness to stay current on new technologies and trends by reading appropriate professional literature.

Department Heads are encouraged to support continuing education requirements where applicable to departmental needs and budgets. However, if an employee's professional certification lapses, the University may not support re-certification.

Program Outcomes and Costs:

A total of six employees were accepted to participate in the first group, which received funding under the CAP. The total funds committed to these employees for specialized training equaled \$29,015.00. The positions targeted to receive initial funding under the CAP were employees holding IT consultant and system programming positions. These positions have historically been difficult to fill with skilled IT professionals to existing labor market demands. Employees in these positions have also been hard to retain. After

significant training dollars were expended on the employees in these skilled positions, it was not unusual for employees in these positions to leave employment with ECU in order to accept higher paying positions in the private sector. Based on the higher salaries available in the private sector, ECU had also become a training ground for private employers. Under the CAP, the employees who receive funding for specialized training must fulfill the length of service stipulations outlined in the Commitment and Development Plans.

As a result of the positive feedback which management has received about the CAP, the program is now available for managers to use on a university-wide basis. The CAP created a mechanism for structuring professional development plans in a manner that creates and retains internal subject matter experts. Prospective job applicants see ECU as an attractive place to work because of ECU's support of specialized training that may not be available in the private sector. Management sees the CAP as a method to guarantee a return on ECU's investment in developing the organization's subject matter experts.

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