8.13 Facilities

8.13.1 Motivation

Facilities management encompasses a broad spectrum of areas that are rooted in the needs and wants of the student body. Since any SLC is formed with the intention of representing the students, it is natural that the SLC should be concerned with the facilities and environment where the students work. Knowing that not all student requests and inputs will be included in a final decision should not take away from the fact that a facilities management plan put into effect by a joint effort of students and administration could benefit both sides of the table. The administration and faculty will receive organized feedback, and the students will be able to express concerns in a fashion that increases the effectiveness of the response.

8.13.2 Facilities Issues

Issues regarding facilities can be divided into three main categories: general facilities; computers and other available technology; and the student area. A student area is simply where each respective lab or center has assigned student desks and/or workstations.

8.13.2.1 General Facilities

Many of the centers allow students similar full-access privileges to the "core facility," a library, and perhaps a separate computer lab, with no restriction of scheduled hours. While student groups are generally not charged with maintenance of the areas they are permitted access to, it is reasonable to expect that students will "leave it as you found it." The same holds true for a snack area for students, if there is one.

Recycling is also a task that most centers leave to the university, except for one. In this instance, the SLC designates one person to handle recycling and puts the money earned from bottles and cans back into a student-run store.

8.13.2.2 Computers and Technology

Computers and technology are perhaps the most important area in facilities management, since they are the focal point of much of the work that gets done in any research center. Quite commonly, a center will have a given number of computers allotted for individual assignment as well as a set designated for general usage. Usually, the SLC has little or no input into the computer assignment process; it is done by the center administration. Seniority and degree pursued are typically used as a criterion for computer assignment, which commonly leaves the undergraduate students sharing computers. Some centers do not assign undergraduates to a computer at all. Perhaps it is surprising, then, that SLCs generally report that their computer resources are sufficient. Part of the reason undoubtedly is that every student has their own laptop, notebook, or tablet for autonomous computing and later connection to the network.

When it comes to computer updates and maintenance, the SLC is only marginally involved in the upgrading of their individual center-owned computers, while network and university computers are left to the administration. To ensure that student computing needs are accommodated, the SLC should offer to provide input to the center administration on as "as needed" basis and make the student body aware that the SLC can communicate needs to the ERC's leadership team.

Available peripheral devices and technology typically consist of printers, scanners/copiers/faxes, digital cameras and videocameras, LCD projectors, and video editing equipment. The selection of peripheral devices for student use is in the hands of the administration, although SLC input is sometimes requested by the administration. Some centers have a Facilities Director/Network Support Specialist who is in charge of such decisions and will sometimes ask for the input of the SLC.

8.13.2.3 Information Exchange

Also included under facilities is the issue of information exchange among the center students, faculty, administration, and industry partners. Email (including listservs such as Google Groups) and a website are the most common means. Most SLCs maintain their own web page within the ERC's main website. Some have a dedicated Facebook page for news and networking.

8.13.2.4 Student Area Environment

The final major facilities issue concerns the areas where students typically spend a majority of their time in the ERC. This itself varies greatly across the centers. Some schools have one general area where students have their desks and computers; but others have several such areas, and on separate campuses. That being said, this discussion will apply to each individual area or lab, rather than to the center as a whole.

Most centers put the students' office space together, or in close proximity to each other. The responsibility for desk space and arrangement of lab area workspace varies across the centers. In some ERCs this varies according to department; some centers allow the students to decide, or at least solicit SLC input; in others this varies per faculty member and in others the students have no involvement.

Some ERCs have student offices spread out through their respective departments but designate a large space for collaboration with labs, lounge areas, and conference/meeting rooms with multimedia display options such as desktop sharing to enable communication across campuses or other locations. SLC/Student input should be heavily considered in the design and furnishing of this space since it is primarily for the students. Recreation and lounge areas are important for community building within the center.

Many centers have a phone system that assigns anywhere from 2 to 10 people per phone in a student area. This type of system requires a method for making sure that people get their messages when they are not personally able to answer the phone. Some centers have given each phone a voice mailbox for taking messages, thus eliminating the responsibility and culpability for message delivery, or lack thereof. Perhaps the more common approach relies on a note or email to the person for whom the phone call was intended. Most centers reported that their methods worked satisfactorily. Obviously in the era of ubiquitous cell-phones, the center phone system is less important than it was in the past, although there is a still a role for the traditional wired phone system.

Aside from email, one of the most common document exchange methods is online, via Dropbox or Google Docs or other file-sharing system. This can be accommodated at the SLC level or the ERC level. Ftp is rarely used nowadays, as are faxes.

Meetings and presentations are quite commonplace in almost any center; therefore, reserving conference rooms is an important task. Most schools centers rely on a web-based sign-up scheduler such as Outlook or contact a center administrative staff member, who will note the reservation and set the room and audio-visual equipment as resources for the meeting. Connectivity options for meetings spanning several campuses or other locations including webcams and some desktop sharing software such as WebEx can also be very useful.

8.13.3 Best Practices and Conclusions

General Facilities
There does not appear to be a best practice here, unless it is the common practice of leaving maintenance and services in the hands of the university.

Computers and Technology
It is universally true that obtaining the best results from one's hard work and effort requires that one use the right tools for the job. It is a given in any center that access to adequate technology is necessary for students to be productive in the lab. Any SLC and any administration will concede this point willingly; the problem arises with the definition of "adequate." Few people will know what the students need better than the students, but among those few would perhaps be the select group of administrators and faculty members involved in the center. It is a good idea for these two groups to discuss together what is needed to maintain or improve the work coming out of their center, rather than having one group dictate these decisions.

Information Exchange
It seems that, especially with all ERCs being multi-university centers, a website or file server, or in some cases a dedicated SLC Facebook page, might be the simplest form of mass information exchange. Using a file server or

website eliminates the delay associated with waiting for someone to check their email, and creates an easily accessible and convenient method of information storage-if properly indexed, of course. In conjunction with Smartphones, Facebook posts can be useful; and for brief messages, Twitter can be employed.

Student Area Environment
Students must be able to achieve a reasonable comfort level within the center if they are to be expected to work and be productive there. Students who don't find this "comfort zone" may become disconnected from the center, which then creates other problems. The student area environment, then, must be conducive to getting work done and must be somewhat malleable to meet the needs of the students. This may be primarily a function of student seating arrangements, which appears to be quite similar from center to center. Locating people according to project or department seems to be working very well for each center, except in cases where the center is widely dispersed across campus.

Mediating issues that arise between students may be something in which SLCs should not get involved. Instances where judgment and decision may leave some or all of the parties involved feeling slighted or resentful is not something that any center wants or needs for its students. The administration is the most impartial and probably the best source for resolution of conflicts that arise between students. However, there may be a role for the SLC here, which could be determined by each SLC as they see fit. This is a matter of quality of student life within the center, and as such the SLC should have some - even if limited - involvement and attention.

While there is no best ratio of telephones to students, the size of the student body within the center and character of the center should be a consideration when setting up the message system. If center students make and receive important phone calls, voicemail may be the best way to relieve people of the pressure of delivering someone's "very important and urgent message" and then making sure someone gets that message. With regard to the use of cell-phones in labs and classrooms, standard phone etiquette prevails and should be adhered to and made clear to individuals who tend to violate these standards.

Conference rooms are always in demand, and it may the case that they are quickly booked when found to be available. Even if this is not the case, making a conference room's schedule of events easily accessible, either by website or Microsoft Outlook online scheduler, makes planning and coordinating meetings, conferences, and presentations much easier.

Overall Facilities Conclusion
One of the primary responsibilities of each SLC, as noted in Section 8.3.1, is to represent the student body to the administration, and in doing so to communicate the needs and concerns of the students. Allowing the SLC to have some voice in facilities management ensures that they carry out another facet of this responsibility. The most important objective is to ensure that the students at least have access to the necessary technology to be productive. However, one should not discount the other issues raised here, as all hold relevance to student life in their respective center.

Source URL: https://legacy.erc-assoc.org/best_practices/813-facilities