



PROFILE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT High School of Computers and Technology The Bronx, New York

About the High School of Computers and Technology

The High School for Computers and Technology (HCST) is located in the northeast section of the Bronx. In addition to their core academic classes, students at HCST participate in a sequence of computer-related courses focusing on computer maintenance and repair, web design, office software applications, and setting up and running data networks.

HCST is one of several small schools that are housed in a building that formerly housed the Evander Child High School. The building has been reconfigured as the Evander Child Campus, with six small high schools occupying the five-story building.

HCST was opened in 2004 with just ninth grade students, as the upper grades of the previous high school were being graduated. Over time, the school's enrollment built up to a fully enrolled four-year program. Today, about 96 percent of students are considered eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Partnering with Employers for Work-Based Learning

In their senior year, students spend the morning taking academic courses required for graduation. After lunch, they spend the afternoon participating in a work-based learning experience relating to computer networking and computer services. HCST currently has about 130 seniors, and most of them are involved in an external internship placement.

To be eligible for work-based learning credits (up to four credits for each of two sessions), students commit to working 15 hours a week for 16 weeks, for a total number of 180 hours per four credits. Students work in a variety of settings in the community surrounding HCST, including two senior citizen residences and community centers, two local public libraries, five local Staples office supply stores, and other sites such as a local elementary school, another high school, and two university-based technology outreach programs for local residents.

HCST also created a computer technology service team called the "Mouse Squad." This team of students provides technology services to all of the six schools operating within the Evander Child's campus. These students are the most highly skilled students within the program. The Mouse Squad students take calls from teachers and administrators throughout the campus, write up and track service orders, and resolve as many issues as possible. This activity gives a real-life "Help Desk" experience to the Mouse Squad team.

To ensure the students are reflecting upon their work experience, every student is required to write a 500 word essay in response to a provided prompt. This totals about 12 essays per year per student. Many of the essays are posted on a public bulletin board near the main office.

Beginnings of Community Outreach

Mr. Stan Bellis is the Work-Based Learning coordinator for the HCST. Bellis spent his career in the telecommunications industry, and upon retirement decided to pursue a second career in education. When he began pursuing education employment, he was quickly hired by the school's principal, Bruce Abramowitz, who was staffing up the new school.

HCST's now-extensive community outreach effort actually started on a very small scale. It happens that a medium-sized senior living center is located across the street from HSCT campus. One day early in his tenure, Mr. Bellis walked across the street and introduced himself to the director of the senior center; he explained the focus of HSCT and offered to help the center create a computer lab for the residents using surplus, slightly out-of-date computers that the high school had on hand. The surplus computers were donated to the senior center and that summer, students worked with Mr. Bellis to install the computers and link them to the existing high-speed connection that had previously only been available for use by center staff members. Once the computer lab was established, it became obvious that seniors needed help with using the computer applications and keeping the computers virus free and well-maintained. This provided an opportunity for summer jobs for about six HCST students. Mr. Bellis was able to use funding from the city's Work-Based Learning fund to pay stipends for the students during that first summer.

Development of Senior Year Internships

After establishing the summer jobs initiative, Mr. Bellis began preparing for the rising high school seniors' work-based learning activity. The first group of students reached 12th grade in the year 2007; that is when the work-based learning initiative began in earnest. Eighty students were eligible for internships that year, and Mr. Bellis set out to create internship opportunities for as many students as possible.

He contacted another senior center, at which HCST students were able to establish a small computer lab. The second center has fewer residents so fewer students were required to assist. A total of 15 students work at the senior center across the street from high school and another four students work at the other local senior center.

Next, Bellis thumbed through the local Yellow Pages and discovered a number of Staples office centers in the northeast Bronx area. He contacted the Staples regional office based in Manhattan and spoke to a human resources manager there; that manager put him in contact with key decision-makers within the Bronx stores. There are now five stores Staples stores in Bronx and they each place multiple interns each session.

He also contacted the New York public library system central office, introducing himself as being "from the Board of Education with the opportunity to place interns" in the library system. Now there are multiple HSCT students working in local library branches. They serve as "pages" that provide computer technology coaching for users, computer maintenance and connectivity.

Bellis also identified a public preschool in the neighborhood, known as an "Astor School," which provides special services for students who have experienced significant trauma. Students from HCST also created a relationship to assist another local high school -- the Columbus High School Annex.

At local elementary school PS (public school) 41, HCST students help in the library by maintaining computers, keeping internet connectivity, and assisting the children in using the computers correctly, as well as supporting them in math and literacy activities.

In another outreach opportunity, he identified programs operated by the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY), both of which provide computer-based computer technology outreach programs to residents of the Northeast Bronx.

Preparing Students for Successful Internships

To facilitate the internship placements, Mr. Bellis interviews each partner and completes a standardized intern placement form for each work placement opportunity. He posts those internship placement opportunity announcements on a bulletin board in the hallway outside the main office. On another board, there are forms that describe each of the 20 work placement sites where internships happen. This allows students to become familiar with characteristics of each sponsoring organization as well as the specific internship opportunities. Students select opportunities in which they are interested, and Mr. Bellis coordinates the opportunity to meet with a “hiring manager” from the organization. Interviews typically happen at the HSCT campus.

When it comes to preparing students for their internship experiences, the intensive preparation begins in the springtime of the junior year. In March, volunteer businesspersons associated with Junior Achievement come to HCST to conduct five days of sessions with students, helping them develop resumes and think about interviewing skills, customer service and personal financial management.

Partnership Building and Maintenance

Mr. Bellis explains his approach to building and maintaining business partner relationships. First, he says that going to meet “in person” is the most important aspect of developing a strong partnership. He typically does not work by phone, instead walking into an establishment unannounced to introduce himself, asking to speak with the manager, and then describing the HCST program and the opportunity to place interns.

Principal Abramowitz gave a tongue-in-cheek description of Mr. Bellis as a “silver-tongued devil” in his ability to strike up conversations and convince partners to host HSCT interns.

Bellis also uses the face-to-face mode for maintaining relationships and to check on how his student interns are performing. About three days a week he gets out of the building to visit each and every one of the 20 worksites that host HSCT students. He simply talks with the managers and supervisors to see how the students are doing and address any challenges that might have come up. Typically these visits are very short, but he says that the face-to-face interactions are essential to maintaining strong partnerships.

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