

Strategic Alignment of Human Resource  
Practices at REACH

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### **Purpose and Agenda**

The purpose of this project was to investigate the human resource practices in Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH) at the University of Louisville. In this project I looked at the HR practices and tried to determine their alignment with the organization's corporate strategy, mission statement, and provide recommendations for better alignment. First, we'll learn about REACH, their mission statement, competitive strategy, and human resource practices. Lastly, I provide a diagnosis of the alignment and recommendations for alignment between the HR practices and strategies.

### **Introduction**

Resources for Academic Achievement or REACH) is the primary academic support unit at the University of Louisville (UofL). REACH was created at the University of Louisville in 2000. REACH began as a unit organized under the Academic Provost's Office. The initial offerings by REACH included: support for developmental mathematics and reading courses for students with mathematics or reading deficiencies; a math lab for those developmental math classes; and advising for all students enrolled in the continuing studies program and those students who had undecided majors; and the Learning Resources Center. REACH has greatly changed since it was created and its development has been the result of the focus by the university on strengthening the academic support for undergraduate students at UofL (History, 2015).

REACH is the home of multiple academic support services and retention programs. Today the following services are offered to all undergraduate students: the Math Resource Center (MRC), the Virtual Math Center (VMC), the Computer Resource Centers in Ekstrom Library and MITC, the Delphi Digital Media Suite, and tutoring in the Learning Resource Center (LRC) (both onsite and online).

I am currently employed by REACH as the Coordinator for GEN 105 Supplemental College Reading & the REACH Student Success Seminars.

There are 11 professional staff members employed by REACH including the REACH Executive Director, Associate Director for Math Resources, Associate Director for Supplemental Instruction, Associate Director for Computer Resources, Coordinator for the Learning Resource Center, Coordinator for Math Resources, Coordinator for Peer Mentoring, Coordinator for GEN 105 & Student Success Seminars, Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutoring Training, Research Analyst, and

Administrative Associate. While, not necessarily under the REACH umbrella, the Unit Business Manager for Undergraduate Affairs handles payroll and accounting for REACH.

REACH also employs 19 graduate assistants. The graduate assistants report to the different associate directors and coordinators. REACH also employs well over 100 student employees as tutors, mentors, and work study students.

### **Method**

To gather information about REACH, various sources were researched. These resources included looking at the REACH website and interviews with six staff members of REACH and Undergraduate Affairs. By utilizing the REACH website I learned more about REACH, their mission, and values. This information better prepared me for the interviews that I planned with employees of REACH. For this project I interviewed the REACH Executive Director, the Undergraduate Affairs Unit Business Manager (UBM), the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training, the Learning Resource Center Coordinator, a Graduate Student Assistant (GSA) for REACH, and a student employee for REACH. The six interviews gave an extensive overview of the staff of REACH and was helpful in providing broader and more diverse descriptions and explanations to my questions. All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the project and the confidentiality of their answers.

A review of literature related to human resources in higher education was all conducted.

### **Mission**

The mission of REACH is to support the academic success of a diverse undergraduate student population.

REACH accomplishes the mission by focusing on the following three goals:

- assist students to enhance or improve their academic performance
- help students transition to college life
- support the university's retention of undergraduate students.

Since the creation of REACH in 2000, REACH has evolved into a complex and robust academic support unit at the university. They offer many large group study sessions and small group tutoring sessions for 100, 200 and 300 level undergraduate courses, one on one coaching for academic development, peer mentoring for first-year students, seminars on student success topics, and

instruction/tutoring in computer science and digital media production (2013-2015 Mission, 2015 & About REACH, 2015).

### **Strategy**

Originally there was no competitive strategy for REACH. Most of the individuals interviewed for the project stated we have no competition, so we do not need a competitive strategy. However, using bits and pieces from each of the interviews, I was able to develop the following strategy: *The competitive strategy of REACH is to provide academic services and specific support programs to enable students to better prepare and adapt to college life. In addition, programs offered through REACH help students enhance their academic skills and performance in college courses in order for them to have successful college careers. What sets REACH apart from other departments at the University of Louisville is the comprehensive centralization of our services (all subjects but English and writing) and the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) certification, which gives credibility (especially with parents and faculty) and ensures that REACH staff follows best practices.*

I sent the strategy to each of those interviewed to get their opinions and they all believed that this strategy statement describes REACH and its strategy if it needed to compete with other services on campus.

### **Current HR Practices at REACH**

The HR functions at REACH can be broken up into the five domains suggested by Bernardin & Russell (2013): organizational design, staffing, performance measurement and appraisal, employee training and organizational development, and rewards systems, benefits, and compliance (pg. 10). The way in which the five domains are implemented varies at REACH. As mentioned before we are unique in that we have professional staff members and student staff members. The student staff members far outnumber the professional staff employees. The way in which each of the five domains is utilized varies based on which type of employee you are.

### **Work Analysis**

With the professional staff most of the human resources functions are actually “outsourced” to the University HR department. However, with the student staff members most of the human resource functions are internal to REACH, with the exception of some payroll functions. The executive director of REACH is primarily involved in the organizational design with the University HR department and the Unit

Business Manager (UBM). According to the Executive Director “organizational design is primarily utilized when new initiatives are handed down from the university provost” (G. Bailey, personal communication, April 14, 2015). For example, this was utilized in the creation of my position at REACH. According to the Executive Director, the Provost assigned him to serve on the KY Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) committee. Through work on this committee, CPE implemented the need for supplemental courses such as GEN 105. As a result, job analysis/work analysis, and job design was utilized to create my position. He stated “we first looked at current positions in REACH to see if the job responsibilities could be incorporated into a position we already had, however as we analyzed the positions we realized that a new position would have to be created” (G. Bailey, personal communication, April 14, 2015).

The organizational design and work analysis for the student staff members is very decentralized. Each coordinator for REACH is responsible for the job analysis/work analysis, and job design for the positions that fall into their purview. When speaking with the Coordinator for the Learning Resource Center, she mentioned that this has caused some issues for her. She stated “when I hire a tutor to work in the LRC, I have job expectations that are utilized for my tutors, that same tutor may also be working over in the Computer Resource Center, and the coordinator there may have completely different expectations for that tutor” (J. Hohmann, personal communication, April 13, 2015).

Some functions such as the HRIS system, which holds confidential and important information for both professional and student employees is maintained by the University HR Department and Information Technology. The University utilizes a software package from Oracle called PeopleSoft. This software acts as a data warehouse for all employee and student data information. Information in this system can be accessed from the university portal ULink. Basic student employee data is also maintained in a REACH specific database that is maintained internally. This database contains names, addresses, phone numbers, REACH position, center employment, pay rate, t-shirt size, and training status. Currently there is no way for student staff to update this information without contacting the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training.

## **Planning**

According to Bernardin & Russell (2013), “HR planning (HRP) should be an integral part of competitive strategy. The most effective approach to staffing, whether adding workers or eliminating them, is to assess staffing needs with a focus on meeting customer requirements and expanding the customer base” (p. 140). Bernardin & Russell (2013) also state that “planning is the forecasting of HR

needs in the context of strategic business planning and sales forecasting” (p. 140). REACH is utilizing planning. The REACH Executive Director, stated “when we decided to create the 3 new entry level positions, we utilized planning based on the REACH mission of supporting the academic success of a diverse undergraduate student population” (G. Bailey, personal communication, April 14, 2015).

Environmental scanning was utilized in the creation of these new positions. To create these positions, REACH is eliminating 6 graduate assistant positions. Data from tutor, student, and graduate student staff (GSA) evaluations showed that the constant turn over year after year with the graduate assistants needed to be changed.

Environmental scanning is also utilized in determining how many tutors are needed for the next academic year. Based on data collected from TutorTrac (REACHs student usage tracking software), REACH is able to plan which courses will need to have tutors.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment occurs with professional staff, GSAs, and student staff. Professional staff recruitment is outsourced to the University HR department. Graduate and Student staff recruitment is conducted internally by REACH. REACH utilizes a mixture of both internal and external recruitment strategies to fill the student staff positions. REACH is accredited by the College Reading and Learning Association. As part of this accreditation, REACH has 3 levels of student staff tutoring positions: Level 1, Level 2, and Master Tutor. Level 1 tutors are usually external candidates. Level 2 and Master Tutor certification requires that the tutors be either Level 1 to achieve Level 2, or Level 2 to achieve Master Tutor. Staffing practices occur both with the professional staff and student staff at REACH. Student staff members do not need to apply to become Level 2 tutors. They must achieve certain training hours and tutoring hours to achieve Level 2 status. The Master Tutor position does require student staff to apply. They must have a certain number of tutoring hours and training, as well as a satisfactory performance evaluation. Several methods of recruiting are utilized by REACH. These methods include: Walk-ins/Unsolicited Applicant Files, referrals, advertising, and electronic recruiting through the University Career Center Cards CareerLink site (G. Carmichael, personal communication, April 13, 2015).

### **Selection**

Selection is probably the one area that is most directly related to mission and strategic objectives of REACH. Bernardin & Russell (2013) state “as with the job analysis and recruitment process, personnel selection should be directly related to the HR planning function and the strategic objectives of

the company” (p. 186). One of the main goals that REACH supports is to “assist students to enhance or improve their academic performance.” In order to assist students to improve their academic performance REACH must select student staff members who are some of the highest caliber students at the University of Louisville. One of the first steps that both Student Staff and GSAs must complete is an application for employment. This application can be found on the REACH website under “job opportunities.” Student staff must submit two letters of recommendation, as well as maintain at least a cumulative GPA of 3.0. Graduate Student Staff must also submit two letters of recommendation, official university transcripts, letter of intent, and have a cumulative GPA of 3.0. Both student staff and GSAs must also undergo reference checks and background checks. The background checks are outsourced to the University HR department. REACH does utilize application blanks for the students who apply to be tutors. However, based on the research presented in Bernardin & Russell (2013) they are not utilizing evidence based practices when utilizing application blanks. According to Bernardin & Russell (2013) “scholarly research shows that when adequate data are available, the best way to use and interpret application blank information is to derive an objective scoring system for responses to application blank questions” (p.192). Based on interviews with both the Unit Business manager and the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training the information entered into the application blanks is only used for basic information, and there is no weighting of the data (M. Priddy, personal communication, April 10, 2015; G. Carmichael, personal communication, April 13, 2015).

Perhaps it is the nature of hiring student staff, but REACH does not utilize any type of personnel testing, drug testing, or performance testing in the selection of its student staff or Graduate Student Assistant staff. The primary selection method for hiring both student workers and GSAs is the utilization of structured and group/panel interviews. This is also true for professional staff positions as well.

### **Performance Management & Appraisals**

Performance appraisals are utilized in REACH for professional staff, student staff and GSAs.

Professional staff use the Management by Objectives performance and appraisal system as directed by the university HR department. According to Bernardin & Russell (2013), this system allows for “a comparison between specific, quantifiable target goals the actual results achieved by an employee” (p. 254). Bretz, Milkovich, & Read (1992), state that the management by objectives “is the preferred format for assessing executives, managers, and professional employees” (Bretz, Milkovich, & Read, 1992, p. 331). Shetty & Carlisle (1974), state that MBO “seems to possess promising potential as a

flexible method for systematic evaluation and improvement of professional employee performance in colleges and universities” (Shetty & Carlisle, 1974, p. 155). The REACH Executive Director stated in his interview that he “believes the MBO approach works well with the mission and strategy of REACH”. The job descriptions that are created for each individual are crafted so that the position is working to help meet the mission of the department. When the appraisal is completed each year, new goals and objectives are set based on the job description and the mission of the department. As a result, the MBO style of evaluation allows for the Executive Director and the employees to measure how well they are meeting the needs to the department. Shetty & Carlisle (1974) found in their research that “the greatest change was associated with better understanding of the goals and priorities of the department. More than 46 percent of the respondents (15.6 percent indicating significant improvement and 31.1 percent slight improvement) felt that the MBO program improved their understanding of the departmental goals and priorities” (Shetty & Carlisle, 1974, p. 156).

Student staff and GSAs are evaluated using a summated rating type of evaluation. The evaluation asks the evaluator to evaluate the students on 8 different factors using a scale of excellent, satisfactory, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. According to Bernardin & Russell (2013) “summated scales are one of the oldest formats and remains one of the most popular for appraisal of job performance” (p. 252). The job factors listed on the evaluation are directly related to mission of REACH. The only issue noticed when reviewing the student staff evaluation is that student staff do not have a job description that lists the job factors that they must achieve. The only time that they see these factors is during the evaluation process. The Coordinator for the Learning Resource Center stated that she sometimes has a hard time completing the evaluation. She mentioned that she was sometimes lenient on some of her evaluations based on what she knew about the tutor (J. Hohmann, personal communication, April 13, 2015). According Bernardin & Russell (2013), this is known as the “halo or horns effect” (p.256).

### **Training**

Training is conducted at REACH for professional staff, student staff, and GSAs. Professional staff training is primarily outsourced to the University HR department. They offer new employee training, as well as on going professional development training. The primary training that professional staff attend is employee orientation. Based on my own experiences the three objectives for orientation as mentioned by Bernardin & Russell (2013) apply. Bernardin & Russell (2013) state that “generally, the objectives of an employee orientation program are threefold: (1) to assist the new employee in adjusting to the

organization and feeling comfortable and positive about the new job; (2) to clarify the job requirements, demands, and performance expectations; and (3) to get the employee to understand the organization's culture and quickly adopt the organization's goals, values, and behaviors" (p. 311). New professional staff orientation also follows the three stages as discussed by Bernardin & Russell (2013): "(1) a general introduction to the organization, often given by the HR department; (2) a specific orientation to the department and job typically given by the employee's immediate supervisor; and (3) a follow-up meeting to verify that the important issues have been addressed and employee questions have been answered" (p. 311). The university HR department also requires all employees to undergo online training on sexual harassment.

Student staff training is internal to REACH. Both student staff and GSAs are trained at the beginning of the fall and spring semester. Training for student staff is based on the requirements of the College Reading and Learning Association certification. The training is aligned each semester with the requirements for certification. Training for student staff is primarily informational, in that the information is transmitted one-way to the student staff. However, there are a few parts of training that are experiential. Most of the training is presented to the student staff in lecture format. e-Learning is utilized by REACH to train students on tutoring pedagogy. The REACH Ambassador student mentors participate in experiential training that simulates different scenarios they may face as student mentors. Evaluations of training are conducted by the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training. Using the data collected in the interview with the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training it was determined that REACH is collecting at least two of the five types of data suggested by Bernardin & Russell (2013): reactions and learning (Bernardin & Russell, 2013, p. 301).

### **Employment Relationship & Labor Unions**

The employment relationship domain is outsourced to the University HR department for REACH professional staff. Payroll, benefits, and employee support is handled by this office. REACH does have a liaison with the University HR department. The UGA Unit Business Manager works with HR and the REACH employees to ensure that the employee relationship with University is ok. There are no labor unions at the University of Louisville. The University HR department does provide an avenue for grievances at UofL. Professional staff do have the opportunity to interact with the Staff Senate.

The employment relationship with Student Staff is handled internally at REACH. The primary way this domain is handled with student staff and GSA is through the REACH Student Staff handbook. This handbook provides brief descriptions of each REACH center, each position, tutor and tutee bill of rights, tutor ethics, REACH policies such as meals and breaks, disciplinary process, and important forms staff may need. The student staff handbook also includes forms that are used when student staff exit the organization. Student staff work with the Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training regarding employee benefits. The Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training then works the UGA Unit Business Manager regarding any payroll or other employment issues. Both the Graduate Assistant for REACH and Student Employee interviewed for this project did not know of any grievance policy that REACH offers to student staff (J. Newton, personal communication, April 9, 2015; B. Stivers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). The Coordinator for Marketing, Advertising, & New Tutor Training was also not aware of any type of grievance policy or how a student staff member would go about handling any grievances (G. Carmichael, personal communication, April 13, 2015).

REACH does conduct student employee satisfaction surveys annually. This information is used by each REACH center to make changes.

### **Analysis of Alignment**

Because we now know the mission and strategy of REACH and the current HR practices, the alignment between the two can be analyzed. The mission focuses on supporting the academic success of a diverse undergraduate student population. According to Arslan, Akdemir, & Karsli (2013) "Wright and McMahan (1992) introduced the strategic HRM paradigm defined as "the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals" (p.298)." In this paradigm, the primary function of HR is to translate organizational strategy into human resources priorities" (Arslan, Akdemir, & Karsli, 2013, p. 744). Based on this and what was observed at REACH with the professional staff, I do believe that HR at the University is helping to translate organizational strategy into human resources priorities. Research conducted by Arslan, Akdemir, & Karsli (2013) found that in many instances the transition of higher education HR functions to those using a strategic HRM approach were slow. They state "many higher education HR departments continue to embrace the traditional, administrative gate keeper role of the past" (p. 745).

There are some issues with alignment of the REACH mission and strategy with HR practices in the area of student staff and GSAs. REACH is doing well with planning and recruitment, training, and the

employee relationship. Based on the interviews with the different staff at REACH and from my own observations there is some alignment but also some misalignment with the domains of work analysis, selection, and performance evaluations. I believe that these 3 misalignments are all connected and they stem from the first domain: work analysis. As mentioned on the work analysis slide the work analysis is very decentralized in regards to student staff and GSAs. Each REACH coordinator has their own expectations of what is required of the student staff members. This leads to confusion with the student staff, because many times they will work for more than one REACH center. This then transfers over to selection. Because each coordinator has their own expectations, they each hire staff very differently. It also relates to misalignment with performance evaluations. The student performance evaluations list job factors that students are to be evaluated on. However, as the student employee that I interview stated "When I saw the evaluation for the first time I asked my supervisor, where did these factors come from" (B. Stivers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). There are no job descriptions for each the different student positions in REACH.

As an employee of this organization, I feel that one of the primary reasons for the disconnect with these 3 domains, is the lack of professional staff involvement in the creation of the REACH mission and strategic plan. Within the REACH Professional staff, there is a leadership team that consists of the REACH Executive Director and the 3 Associate Directors. Since I started working in REACH the leadership team has developed the strategic plan without the input of the other REACH professional staff members.

### **Recommendations**

As mentioned on the Analysis of Alignment slide, the REACH Strategic Plan was developed by the REACH Leadership team with little to no input from the REACH Coordinators. In order for REACH to align its HR practices to its mission and strategic plan, the individuals who are in charge of hiring student staff and GSAs should be included in the next development of the strategic plan. REACH must also actively include human resources planning into its strategic plan. Throughout the research on human resources strategy in higher education, the best practices seem to indicate that "organizations which link their human resource needs with strategic planning will be more successful than organizations which fail to do this" (Smith & Ferris, 1990, p. 15). Research also suggested that many colleges and universities are failing to link HR and strategic planning. Smith and Ferris (1990) found in their research that with "most colleges and universities, human resources strategy and planning is neither well developed nor frequently practiced" (p. 21).

Utilizing work analysis, REACH needs to develop job descriptions for the GSAs and student staff members. According to Bernardin & Russell (2013) “there are numerous products that can be derived from work analysis. The most frequently and commonly used products include “job descriptions” and “job specifications”” (p. 105). The job descriptions need to include “job duties, tasks, activities, behaviors, competencies, and/or responsibilities” (p. 105). The job description should also include identification of critical internal and external customers, who in this case would be the students that utilize REACH services. During the creation of the job descriptions, the coordinators need to be mindful of REACH’s strategic plan and mission to focus the responsibilities on supporting the academic success of a diverse undergraduate student population. I would also recommend that REACH develop specific job descriptions for each of the different tutors based on the different subjects that REACH offers tutoring in.

As a result of clear job descriptions that are focused on the mission and strategic plan, a redesign of the student staff and GSA performance evaluations should occur next. Bernardin & Russell (2013), state “the most effective PM&A systems define and measure performance as clearly as possible in the context of carefully defined organizational objectives and then attempt to understand the causes of that good or not so good performance” (p. 243). Bernardin & Russell (2013), suggest that effectiveness of performance management and appraisals is best achieved by following a prescription that includes: precise definitions and measurement of performance, the content and measurement derived from customers in the context of the organizations objectives, multiple raters, and a process for investigating and correcting constraints on performance” (p. 240-241). First, REACH should define performance for the tutors and how it is measured. They should work with students who come into the different centers to help determine how the performance is measured. Using the current system of Master Tutors, REACH can easily implement a multiple rater process. Masters Tutors can be trained on how to evaluate the Level 1 & Level 2 tutors. The new performance appraisal can then be utilized for compensation, performance improvement, and documentation, and training needs.

REACH should also work to create a grievance policy for student staff.

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## Appendix

### Questions asked during each of the interviews:

1. What do you believe is REACH's competitive strategy? What sets us apart at the University of Louisville?
2. How are the human resource plans for REACH aligned with competitive strategy outlined above?
3. How does the UGA Business office and REACH communicate and work together to achieve HR strategic objectives for the organization? Is it effective and efficient? If so why? If not why?
4. Does REACH utilize selection interview questions that measure specific Knowledge Skills and Abilities identified by a job analysis as needed for the job.
5. Does REACH utilize job analysis to determine the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed for its Professional staff? Student Staff?
6. In what ways is the performance appraisal system utilized by REACH tied to the REACH's strategic objectives? Is it the same for Professional Staff and Student staff? If not how does it differ?
7. Is each employee's performance appraisal format derived from a specific job analysis for their job?
8. How are employees and coordinators involved in training and development?
9. How are employees and coordinators involved in determining training needs?
10. Are REACH employees encouraged to make suggestions for improving performance REACH?
11. Does management take all product and process improvement suggestions seriously?
12. What methods are used to measure employee satisfaction in REACH?
13. In what ways is the REACH work environment conducive to the well-being of all employees?