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Our Student Library Workers Rock!

Investing in the Student Staff Development Process

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Introduction

Libraries across higher education are grappling with a variety of challenges— reductions in staffing levels, redefinition of librarian roles, competing information resources, declines in institutional budgeting – challenges which effect basic library services. Additionally, significant time and effort is needed to maintain previous tasks and responsibilities while exploring, testing and adopting new methods of reaching patrons. Demonstrating the library’s value while continuing to work interdepartmentally and integrating across the campus and curriculum also occupies the focus of librarians. We believe there is an underutilized resource that academic libraries can harness to enhance their basic services – namely, the student staff.

In this paper, we posit that an investment of time and effort to refine how an academic library engages a student during their term of employment with the library will lead to greater library success.

Literature Review

In the 1950s, professional librarians comprised 50 to 90 percent of the staff in college and university libraries. By the late 1980s, support staff members were outnumbering librarians by a ratio of two to one (Stanfield, Palmer 635). During the 1990s, libraries surpassed the point where students were viewed, according to Clark, merely as a “...labor reserve for the monotonous and repetitive tasks that are necessary for successful library operation” (87).

Historically there have been three areas that student training resources have identified as being essential to student worker success. These areas are hiring, training, and developing. A fourth area, assessment, has also been added in recent years keeping with the movement of higher education in this direction (see Chouteau, Heinzman 2007; Lemery 2008). When development is mentioned in these resources, it is often referenced with the goal of training student staff members to take on additional responsibility (Baldwin and Barkley 170-171). Peters and Vilelle’s 2008 article focuses on developing a particular group of student staff, namely shelvers who received a high amount of directional and item-location questions from the library’s customers (63). Douglas Hasty suggests that “...employment of students, more common in the

library profession than in many business environments, allows library student assistants to become invaluable public relations assets” (32). Additionally, customer service has been added as a necessary student staff value. Kathman and Kathman state “If libraries do not provide consistent, quality service, their competitors will take away large parts of the market” (176). This focus on customer service not only provides impetus for students working with library customers but also lays a foundation for students to develop other, transferable skills within the scaffolding of their library employment.

The shift to become less library-oriented and more customer-oriented as a profession has directly affected how student workers are trained or viewed. Student development articles written in the mid-1990’s do not share the same stress or focus on customer service with articles from the early 2000’s. It is doubtful that this was due to a sudden rise in the importance of customer service for the library profession, or because student workers were suddenly unfriendly and had to be retrained. Rather, the rise of outside forces, competing with library services in conjunction with the overall growth of general service industries brought customer service to the forefront as an essential attitude for people working with people. Libraries were no longer guaranteed traffic as the gatekeepers of information. If patrons now had a bad experience, they could go other sources for their information needs (176).

While there has been a noticeable increase in the focus on customer service in the library literature, there is also an increased focus on “data and feedback from students and supervisors” (O’Neil, Comely 100). While articles from the 1990s are, for the most part, largely unconcerned with formal assessment processes, they are not devoid of suggestions for evaluation. Gail Oltmann’s article *The Student Perspective* references an ARL SPEC Kit survey (1990) which contained three separate evaluation forms of student workers. Oltmann also cites a 1992 study by Kathman and Kathman calling for “the use of performance measures to communicate expectations...” and notes that “supervisors should analyze tasks, write and review job descriptions for student assistants and decide what results are expected from the work. They should then write performance measure to address those results” (73). However, there is less specific focus or emphasis on performance measures, evaluation, or feedback. The end of Oltmann’s article does not revisit performance measures explicitly - the closest statement being “...students must know that there are policies and procedures to manage student assistants, just as there are policies and procedures for full-time employees” (75).

If student staff are valuable to the library then they should be treated as such. It seems that this is not always the case. An attitude towards student workers becomes defined by resignation or even resentment when considering hiring and training student workers. Too often “libraries employ students not because they are good or even okay employees, but because it has somehow become our responsibility as librarians to hire college students” (Gerlich 147). Caring about clear expectation and communicating those to the student staff makes an obvious statement about the library’s attitude toward the student staff. Training provides an obvious opportunity to develop student staff members. For nearly all student staff, this position will be their introduction to library work. While the bulk of training will cover the specific steps and details involved in a variety of library tasks, training in more abstract areas can also occur.

“Training does not end with instructions. It must include the supervisor's setting an example of the work ethic encouraged by the library culture, and of the sense of fair play, encompassing both positive and negative feedback, that each library promotes for its employees” (Burrows 83). Clear communication to students is foundational to their success as library workers. “The training process really begins with a well-written job description. Based on this job description, clear performance measures should be established for the position” (Kathman, Kathman 178).

Consider that “many (students) are working in a professional environment for the first time and need guidance about behavior and attire” (Clark 87). Or that most student staff have not previously been exposed to basic library operations. “By guiding students who are assisting other students, librarians create an environment where an informal learning community can grow, encouraging students to realize that the library offers more than just a computer station for working on assignments and checking e-mail” (Stanfield and Palmer 636).

While there may seem to be a certain lack of weight or focus on formalized measures in the older professional literature, there is a definitive sense that the standards and expectations for student staff are the ones librarians and para-professionals also follow. “To fulfill the library’s service needs, the student assistants should receive the same type of customer-service skills training and supervision that would be provided for full-time and career service staff” (Hasty 34).

Student staff should not be held to an arbitrary list of standards; rather all staff members are held to the same standard in order to represent the library well to all who enter it. “If the time, effort and money which we spend on student training is to be worthwhile, it needs to serve not only routine patron needs, but also must in concert with staff supervision, provide librarians with some level of opportunity to exercise academic leadership on their campus” (Burrows 85).

Expectations and Communication

In order to have student workers who rock, we would suggest that there are two basic areas that need to be addressed at the very beginning of the process:

1. Clear expectations for student staff behavior, work, and attitudes.
2. Consistent communication of those expectations.

These may seem like needlessly obvious principles. However as we planned changes for our own approach to student staff development these two areas continued to re-assert themselves as essential building blocks for how the other areas were developed. We were cognizant of the outcomes we wanted from our students, how the ideal student work would look, and tried to work to create an approach that would help our student staff achieve those ends. Instead of providing irregular or inconsistent standards of practice, we sought to provide highly visible and easy-to-remember measures by which the student could be successful.

Failing to set clear and measurable expectations or to communicate clearly and consistently is to set student staff and supervisors up for disappointment and potential failure. However in many cases the clarity of communication is limited to particular areas such as training and not abstracted out to include the student’s general approach to their job. If it is acknowledged that

customer service is important, how does one measure the “customer service-ness” of one’s student staff? How do you set the clear expectations for customer service or staff behaviors and attitudes towards customers for your student staff?

To improve in the four areas of hiring, training, developing and assessing, we identified the values and goals we believed were necessary for our student workers succeed - to perform in accordance with the library’s values, goals, and mission. For our student staff to rock, we determined to improve our communication of expectations to them in quality, quantity and type. We sought to communicate our expectations often through various means so that the student workers would clearly understand the goals and values of the library. Our goal was not to give student workers more things to remember or a list of guidelines to ensnare them. Rather, our goal was to distill what we wanted the qualities of our student workers to be, so that the students would succeed in their tasks at the library.

This initiative in student staff development was undertaken at a small academic library in Pennsylvania during one academic year. The campus consists of about 700 FTE students including a substantial distance-learning population. The school offers undergrad, graduate, and postgraduate degrees. The library staff consists of several part-time paraprofessionals, two full-time professional librarians, and twelve student staff employees who worked an average of eight to ten hours each per week. The professional librarians jointly supervised the student staff.

Hiring

Hiring students can be an intimidating process – for both the interviewee and the interviewer. In a 15-20 minute interview, how can a supervisor determine if this student is going to be a good fit in the library? Will she get along with the other library staff and the library users, be a dependable employee, and understand library values and principles? Not to mention that many candidates may have never interviewed before or never even held a job. (see Murphy, for example)

There are ways to use the interview to develop the student staff. This is the opening opportunity for shaping a student’s perception about working in the library and for communicating the expectations of supervisors. Our first step was to provide interested students with a small set of documents that constitutes an information packet. It includes a job description, a letter describing the interview process, and an application form.

The job description provides clarity regarding responsibilities and standards of performance – this may prove beneficial to students who are not entirely sure what library work involves. The interview letter describes the process so that the student clearly understands what they must do and what steps are involved in the hiring process. It also reminds students to treat the interview as a formal job interview. The application form requests basic information about the student including past employment, relevant skills, etc.

Now that these expectations have been stated, the hiring supervisors have the opportunity to gauge how the candidate treats those expectations. This may involve how an applicant presents herself for the interview, how familiar she seems to be with the job requirements, or how

engaged with the process the candidate is. This may have the happy result of allowing a better assessment of a student's qualities for library employment. And even if a candidate is not hired, participating in an interview, reviewing a job description, or thinking about what a job entails may better prepare her for future opportunities.

When students are hired at the BBC&S library, they are hired for one year. This gives both the library and the student opportunity to continue or end the relationship at that time. A final individual meeting at the end of the year discussed each student's performance during the year. We reviewed the starting goals and asked each student to evaluate his or her performance. While not every student invested themselves in meeting their goals to the same degree, several students made it clear that they deliberately sought to improve in the areas we had previously identified for them

Training

For us, training also provided a chance to communicate how valuable we considered the student staff to be. We believe that we fail student staff by applying unrealistic expectations or communicating our expectations poorly, without investing the proper time and training into those staff. While the attitudes of librarians towards student staff is usually positive, the distinction in position, education, age, and other categories can easily lead to attitudes that devalue student staff. But these distinctions matter less in the practical objective of assisting patrons. Librarians have multiple incentives to work from salary and benefits to the philosophical underpinnings of the vocation of being a librarian. Student staff do not necessarily have those same incentives or philosophical underpinnings for why they are working at the library but "like permanent staff, students take pride in their jobs and they want to feel that they contributing to the success of the organization" (Clark 87).

It is no secret that much of the work student workers perform is monotonous and repetitive. But it is also essential in meeting the needs of patrons. In keeping with the priority on library customer service, training can be shaped to emphasize the importance of even the most mundane tasks. We believe that it is essential to impress upon the student the value of the job that they are doing

Much of our approach to training overlaps heavily with our approach to development and assessment. It is our belief that if training is being done well it is directly linked with both of these areas. It is very easy to walk a first-time student through a tour and basic training of duties. However, as laid out in the literature review and in our experience, this is not sufficient. Development and assessment augment ongoing training and support to help student staff be equipped. We sought to follow Hasty's advice in providing our student with "...instruction in basic customer service principles and specific library-service practices. Each student assistant must realize that his or her role...is crucial and is not overlooked"(35). Student staff who cannot answer questions do not feel equipped and subsequently will not see themselves as valued contributors to the library.

In order to communicate this to our students training was not seen as a one-time thing but an ongoing process, encouraged by the soliciting of questions and feedback from student staff. Additionally we paired up first-time student workers with a more experienced and careful student staff member so that the new student staff member could benefit from the mentoring approach. By monitoring and tracking particular staff processes, such as shelving, reference transactions, book processing, the library staff was able to pinpoint particular areas with individual students so that issues could be addressed quickly and directly.

Developing

Student development is a recognition that training is not a one-time occurrence, but an ongoing program of measurement and feedback that organically links training and assessment of the student staff contributions to the library. Consider that “...no efforts are complete unless the skill and knowledge obtained during training are used and enacted”(38). Library employment is then viewed as an integral component of a student’s academic experience and career arc, rather than a discrete, isolated event. In order to make this connection requires tangible feedback and clear communication.

Chouteau and Heinzman’s 2007 article “Gone Fishing” is an excellent example of a library taking a business philosophical narrative, specifically the Fish! philosophy and creatively improvising on a key aspect of that narrative to create a unique motivational and assessment tool for the library. We wanted to motivate and assess our students as part of our plan for development. We met individually with each student staff member and identified their positive contributions to the library and their strengths. This provided definition about what qualities we valued and let the students know that we appreciated their service. We also identified areas that we believed they could improve upon (such as accuracy, problem-solving skills, or initiative). We asked them then to identify goals that they wished to set for themselves and provided some specific goals we had for them. This collaborative process involved the student staff in setting the standards for their own success and gave them a greater stake in their work in the library. At the end of the year, we met again individually with each student and reviewed the collaborative goals. We provided our assessment of their performance and identified, as specifically as possible, the things we appreciated about their work in the library.

In addition to individual development, we also had development as a group. In revising our student development, we wanted something that would help the student staff cohere as a team so we sought to encourage significant shared experiences. To foster communication we had arranged to meet every three weeks for an hour as a team. So in order to build a stronger sense of team in a fun, informal way, we dedicated half of every meeting to playing a game. We wanted a cooperative and competitive game to help us become more familiar with each other and more accustomed to collaborating and working together. We divided the staff into three teams and adapted the cards from the game Cranium to suit our purposes. Team points were tracked throughout the year and simple prizes were awarded to each member of the winning team.

During our end of year interviews, several students identified the team building game as the reason why they felt so connected to other student staff members. Students also remarked that these game times gave opportunity to get to know other students better and to better cohere as a staff. Since not all students get to work the other students, there is limited interaction between

the student workers. The game time created shared experiences which in turn, created a more relaxed atmosphere. If students are more comfortable around each other, tasks are more easily shared, cooperation is more natural, and investment in one another's success, as well as the success of the library, is more likely.

The other half of each meeting was used for announcements, changes in policies or procedures, scheduling issues, and other information. We also encouraged student questions and comments which has been a very valuable way of identifying items needing our attention or resolving problems. It was not always easy to get them to ask questions or make comments so there were times where we did not proceed until at least a minimum number of questions had been asked. Finally, we periodically had a group discussion centered around an aspect of library philosophy or work objectives to encourage them to think about library goals and objectives in a deeper sense.

These group and individual elements were combined at our final staff meeting of the year. In front of the student staff group, the library director addressed each student by name and identified one particular aspect that we as library staff appreciated about that individual. These qualities were pulled from the observations that the library staff had made about the individual. This provided an opportunity for the entire staff to see the contribution that the particular member had made to the library, but also to see the variety of qualities that we as the library staff found valuable. Singling out individual students also gives the opportunity to demonstrate that the library staff pays attention to student staff performance, cares about them as individuals, and values their service.

Assessing

The recent emphasis on assessment and evaluation in higher education offers profitable ways for libraries to think about student staff

We developed a rubric that established measurable standards for poor, good, and best performance across six aspects of behavior and attitude. (See Table 1.) Each of the six aspects had three specific categories for a total of eighteen measurable items. Each student received a copy of the rubric and it was reviewed at that time in a group meeting. The rubric helped us as supervisors be very explicit about our expectations were for student work performance in the library. It forced us also to establish more measurable standards for assessing student performance.

Table 1.

Area of Assessment	Needs Improvement	Good	Superior
Quality of Work	Does not follow directions, policies or guidelines given. May require additional retraining.	Typically follows directions, policies and/or guidelines. May require a retraining in a particular area.	Follows all directions, policies and/or guidelines. No additional retraining required.
	Work that is claimed to be complete is typically not or missing substantial pieces. Overlooks or forgets details. Work is characterized by frequent inaccuracy.	Work that is claimed to be complete is usually completed satisfactorily. Most details are addressed. Work is characterized by a good level of accuracy.	Work that is claimed to be complete is excellently done. No details are missed. Work is characterized by extreme accuracy.
	Does not stay on task. Does not complete work without prompting. Often distracted by non-work related matters.	Typically stays on task well. Completes most work without prompting. Occasionally distracted by non-work related matters.	Always stays on task. Completes all work without prompting. Not distracted by non-work related matters.
Communication - Interaction	Provide directions or instructions that patrons have difficulty following. Treats patron questions as an inconvenience or interruption.	Provides directions/instructions that patrons can follow. Most patron questions are welcomed.	Provides excellent directions/instructions that patrons can follow. Follows up with patrons to ensure needs were met
	Does not communicate with other student staff members when working in the library or shift changes. Fails to notify staff in a timely fashion for covering shift(s).	Communicates clearly with other student staff members when working in the library or shift changes. Typically gives adequate time/notification to cover shift.	Communicates clearly with other student staff members when working in the library or shift changes. Typically gives adequate time/notification to cover shift. Instructions leave no doubt or confusion; help to clarify/shed light on particulate situation.
	Fails to notify or inform library staff of issues related to library operations.	Leaves notes/emails for other staff/librarians. May require follow up for clarification.	Leaves detailed notes/emails for staff/librarians. Requires no follow-up for clarification.
Dependability	Is often late or leaves early for unnecessary reasons. Calls out on a regular basis w/ no one lined up to take their spot. Forgets to come in when taking another student's shift.	Arrives on time. Rarely calls out of work. Schedules replacements in advance of absence. Does not abandon post.	Arrives five minutes prior to starting. Never calls out (sans legit. emergencies). Schedules replacements well in advance and communicates such to librarians.
	Rarely covers shifts for others.	Covers shifts for others when convenient	Covers shifts for other student staff as they need
	Frequently works on own reading/homework/projects when on the library clock. Does not accomplish much library work during shift.	Rarely works on own reading/homework /projects when on the library clock. Typically accomplishes most to all library work during shift.	Avoids working on own reading/homework/projects when on the library clock. Accomplishes all library work during shift
Area of Assessment	Needs Improvement	Good	Superior
	Occasionally follows through in assigned tasks. Occasionally follows suggested improvements.	Typically follows through w/ assigned tasks. Typically follows suggested improvements.	Always follows through w/ assigned tasks. Always follows suggested improvements.

Initiative	When asked, with adequate time to think/prepare, unable to contribute ideas for library growth, adjustment or improvement.	When asked, with adequate time to prepare/think, contributes ideas to staff for library growth, adjustment or improvement.	Contributes unsolicited ideas to staff for library growth, adjustment or improvement.
	Rarely asks questions to clarify difficult or unclear job assignments	Usually asks good questions to clarify difficult or unclear job assignments	Always asks intelligent questions to clarify difficult or unclear job assignments
	Does not take any initiative in looking for additional work/tasks.	Generally takes initiative in finding work to do when required tasks are completed. Occasionally will ask librarian for additional tasks	Actively keeps oneself involved with library tasks. Is able to locate needed and necessary things to do. Asks librarians for additional tasks.
Attitude	Treats patrons interactions as an interruption	Treats patrons interactions as part of the job routine.	Treats patron interactions as an opportunity to be useful.
	Some interactions with co-workers, patrons are characterized by disrespect and lack of courtesy.	Interactions with co-workers, patrons are typically characterized by respect and courtesy.	Interactions with co-workers, patrons are characterized by respect and courtesy regardless of the individual or his/her attitude.
	Evidences a negative attitude towards assigned tasks. Personal issues or external circumstances consistently distract from work performance.	Exhibits a positive attitude towards assigned tasks. Personal issues or external circumstances rarely distract from work performance.	Exhibits a positive attitude towards assigned tasks. Personal issues or external circumstances do not distract from work performance.
Customer Service	Does not respond to patron requests in a prompt fashion. Sends users to areas rather than conducting or accompanying them.	Respond to patron requests in a prompt fashion. Takes users to their requested areas.	Seeks out patrons to assist in the library ensures user's information need is satisfied.
	Rarely knows the answer. Struggles to remember where to locate information. Painful to watch when answering questions.	Has a good grasp of where things are located in the library. Can locate some things by memory. If unsure knows where to look, knows who to ask.	Has an excellent grasp of where general areas are located in the library. Can locate many things by memory (i.e. pertinent db's) Knows exactly where or who to look/contact when needed.
	Has very little confidence in answers due to lack of preparation.	Generally well-prepared and typically projects confidence in answering questions.	Excellently prepared. Answers questions correctly and w/o second-guessing.

The goal of the rubric is to provide an objective standard of performance that the student and supervisor understand, recognize, share – a common point of understanding. It helps reduce the subjective element from the process of assessing student progress and work. We could have improved our use of the rubric by revisiting the rubric in subsequent student staff meetings or to highlighting it in other helpful ways.

While our other development ideas above focused on qualitative measures, we wanted to use quantitative measures too, with the additional goal of providing tangible, clear feedback.. This involved keeping track of how accurately students performed certain tasks – which in our library were reshelving books and processing books. We adapted Chouteau's and Heinzman's take on the Fish! concept to create visual cues for student work. While we tracked processing accuracy without any special means, laminated, die-cut owls were used to help measure reshelving. When a student reshelved an item, she wrote her initials on the owl before placing it on the shelf to the

left of the reshelfed item. A supervisor collected the owls daily and kept track of how many were shelved accurately or inaccurately for each student.

Not only did this help us ensure that mis-shelved books were quickly corrected, it also communicated to students that we valued accurate work and that their performance was being measured. This improved our shelving accuracy and created a clear expectation in a non-confrontational way. This also allowed us to keep track of the total number of items reshelfed and items processed, to which we also added a running total of reference questions answered by each student. We created a student staff bulletin board and kept track of how each student was ranked in terms of number of items shelved, processed, or answered. Since these numbers were arbitrary and dependent upon hours worked, shift circumstances, and available tasks, we did not use them for assessment, but as development. It provided a means of engaging students with their tasks and at the end of the year we handed out simple prizes for the student who had the most in each category. While not all of the students were motivated by competition, for some it was a noticeable positive factor.

Conclusion

The development of any library's student staff is an ongoing process that requires dedicated time, energy, creativity and commitment. Moreover, this process must be strongly linked to clearly communicated expectations along with basic assessment measures to provide the student staff with constructive criticism and meaningful feedback. We strongly believe that those librarians who are responsible for the hiring, training, developing and assessing of the student staff should view library employment of their institution's students as a unique part of their students' overall growth. Revising our own approach to student staff development has provided us with valuable insights and points to ponder, a strong core of student staff and, we believe, a stronger and more service-oriented library. Above all, the process of re-working our student staff approach has emphasized for us that the opportunities and rewards for investing in students are truly significant and well-worth the time spent.

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