

What is a Library Courtesy Clerk?

*A case study by Adam Mizelle, Library Courtesy Clerk, Hagerty Library, Drexel University
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A Library Courtesy Clerk is a full-time, paraprofessional position based in the circulation department at Drexel University's Hagerty Library, and charged with communicating and enforcing the institution's "courtesies": rules on appropriate library use regarding food, noise, and cell phones. This person's job is to walk the floors once an hour, count heads, look for patrons not observing the rules, and follow up with them. Most students comply, but at times strictness is called for. The position was first filled in January of 2009, and this poster session is provided to summarize two years of work, lessons learned, best practices, and tips for enforcing courtesies at your libraries.



Problem:

A recent ban on meals in the library is widely flouted. Although the adjacent café is a popular meeting place and library use is high, students treat the whole place like a restaurant, bus boys not included. Library staff try to enforce, but the problem is widespread and patrons feel no consequences for not complying. On the one floor serving both the law and undergraduate students, law library staff have been hearing complaints from all sides about undergraduate conduct.

Solution:

Hire a full time staff person: A Library Courtesy Clerk. This position's chief responsibility is maintaining a safe, pleasant, and courteous atmosphere at the library. In practice this means enforcing food and noise policies, which can take months to turn around in a school of this size. This approach allows for focused and consistent enforcement, a long term view, and individual follow-up with repeat offenders. Over time, the Library Courtesy Clerk builds relationships with both libraries, Public Safety, Drexel Business Services, and the Dean of Students' Office. After two years, a position that started out focused on policing food face-to-face has evolved into a kind of "floor manager", crafting posted messages, having a say in furniture arrangements, and guiding other staff in courtesy enforcement.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1860/3429>

A model for a food free library

Hang signs where people study, dense enough so that anyone sitting down sees the "no meals" message somewhere in their field of vision. Place signs in all of the study rooms. Make the prohibition itself ("No Meals") readable from fifteen feet or more. Other details can be smaller. Make the language just stricter than you habitually enforce face-to-face.

This gives you the choice to be more strict when needed.

Walk the perimeter and count heads once an hour. Busy yourself, pushing in chairs and placing stray books and magazines on reshelving areas. Erase inappropriate writing from boards in study rooms. Give a friendly follow-up with people you may have helped at the reference or circulation desks. This signals that your presence is about more than just looking for infractions. You're also here to help.

Catch them eating. If you talk to patrons about food that is uneaten or wrapped up, you will spend too much time and energy arguing with patrons. By leaving wrapped-up food alone, you are showing good will and trust. Chasing trash from already eaten food just invites grief and heckling.

Use **Progressive Discipline** for problem cases. This means giving students *clear information*, with *increasingly strict penalties* for multiple infractions, always warning the student what will happen next if the behavior continues. Example:

Inform the student of the policy and make a specific, direct, but polite verbal request for the patron to correct it. (*"I am sorry to bother you, but the café is open, and your meal is allowed there. Will you please put this away while studying here?"*) If they comply, thank them and move on. *If they refuse . . .*

Ask to see their ID and record their information. Inform the student that if they continue not to comply, that you will contact public safety to have them escorted from the building and refer their case to the office of student conduct and community standards. *If they still refuse to comply and/or refuse to show ID, follow through with exactly the action you warned the patron about.*

This doesn't always happen all at once, so it is important to *always document* when you get a patron's name. This way if they repeat the specific infraction, you can customize how you follow up. Include notes on what happened in case the matter needs to be referred to Public Safety or the Dean of Students' office.

Lessons for Library Directors

Taking something away unilaterally, which is how this felt for the students, invites backlash and this approach requires someone who can listen to students concerns, respond with tact, and take a long term view towards changing the culture of a library. This person also needs thick skin and the ability to lower one's voice to make someone who is shouting listen.

A good Library Courtesy Clerk can walk with presence: in an unhurried, confident, but approachable manner. This is a visible position, and the person doing it must be seen as supported by Access Services, Library Administration, Public Safety, and anyone else working with patrons. This means bringing some staff along for walks, spending time at the reference and public safety desk, and being seen interacting with staff and students. A good candidate for this position is able to connect with diverse patrons from all walks of life.

Dedicated to the memory of Dorothy Schwartz

