

## MANAGING STUDENT EMPLOYEES

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**M**any of us in public, academic, school, and special libraries find ourselves supervising student workers. This article will examine different aspects of the student employee experience, from the hiring process to bringing students into the organization to assessing the mutual benefits gained from hiring student workers.

### THE HIRING PROCESS

It should seem fairly straightforward to have an applicant fill out an application, submit to a brief interview, and then either be hired or not hired. But what if your organization is complex, with many departments and supervisors? How do you make sure that everyone is following the recommendations for fair hiring practices, filling out the necessary paperwork, and making periodic performance evaluations?

At Indiana State University's (ISU) Cunningham Memorial Library, every department independently hired students for a variety of chores ranging from checking out books, shelving, mail sorting and delivery, cataloging, answering questions at the reference desk, etc. Prospective student employees would roam the library looking for service desks. They fill out a variety of applications with little idea of what the job entails. Like the author of a foodservice article, some students truly believed, "They are looking for easier jobs, like the library, where they can get studying done" (Blake, 1997, p. 42). Another problem besides unrealistic expectations of a cushy job, was that many students were not notified when their applications were rejected.

To make the whole process less chaotic, the library's administrative office created a comprehensive handbook that could be used by every department's officially designated student coordinator. *The Student Employment Handbook*, contained in a 3-ring binder, has the following sections:

- Introduction (states the purpose of the handbook)
- Hiring Procedures (posting jobs, applications, interviewing do's and don'ts, telephone reference

check form, Affirmative Action policies, international student guidelines including how and where to get a Social Security card,)

- Evaluations (schedule for doing them, criteria, sample filled out form)
- Payroll (sample time report, adjustment time report, Work Study explanation and award conversion chart, pay periods and pay dates)
- Student Hours (limitations, overtime policy)
- Bi-Weekly Temporary Employees (a way to hire a student for the summer following graduation, sample "Intent to Hire" form)
- Rehiring Students for Fall (the correct form and examples of certain codes that must be included)
- Releasing Students (this ends the active job record for a student for a particular department—and, needless to say, requires a form to be filled out)
- Managing Student Budget (allocations, record keeping)
- Blank forms (blanks of the forms illustrated in the above sections)

In addition, jobs, with job numbers and detailed descriptions, are posted simultaneously at Human Resources and on the library job board. A student can now fill out a single application at the library, and a copy of this application will be made for the student coordinator for each job in which the student has indicated an interest. The student coordinator looks at all applications for the job number, selects several prospects for interviewing, and then notifies the Administrative Office student coordinator of the status of each student (hired/not hired). The office takes care of student notifications and all direct communication with Human Resources and Payroll. Periodic meetings are held with student coordinators to discuss issues and clarify processes. Since the questions are sometimes referred to the library dean or to Human Resources, minutes of the meeting plus the answers to questions are e-mailed to the student coordinators.

At first there was some awkwardness with adjusting to the formality of the postings, the requirement of multiple interviews (i.e., not hiring the first person that walked in the door), and the rigid reporting lines of this new system (only a designated student coordinator could sign forms or ask questions of the Administrative student coordinator). The workload of the Administrative student coordinator increased in many ways (coordinating job postings, photocopying applications, notifying students) but decreased in others (not having to answer the same questions about all our various forms, having forms filled out correctly, etc.) The outcome is that students experience a more professional approach to hiring, and the library benefits by the retention of qualified student workers due to the greater attention given to the interview and evaluation process.

## SELECTING AND INTERVIEWING

Once the hiring process is resolved, it is time to review more closely which students are hired and why. Since student assistants keep the library functioning and do everything from staffing the circulation desk to shelving the books to opening the library, it is important to reflect upon hiring issues. Like any other work, hiring the right person is very important but it is far from an exact science.

To hire the right student it is important to understand your own perspective about hiring student employees. When you are hiring a student what do you look for? Are you only looking for someone to work the hours you need or do you also look for someone who is responsible and reliable, accurate and efficient? Perhaps in some instances you get what you look for. That is, if you are only looking for a warm body to work the eight to midnight shift perhaps that is what you get, just a warm body. David Baldwin, author of *Supervising Student Employees in Academic Libraries*, takes a different view. He states, "Probably the most important part of your job as a supervisor is hiring the right person for the work (Baldwin, 1991, p. 66)."

First, make sure to have an adequate pool of diverse applicants. This can often be achieved by actively recruiting student workers. Recruit student workers by participating in job fairs on campus or in high schools and post vacancy notices in areas where students are likely to congregate. Make sure that your notice capitalizes on what makes your library an appealing place to work.

Secondly, take time to write a job description that conveys what the work entails, what skills are needed, and what schedule is required. Explain any special qualities that may be needed for the job, a reading knowledge of Spanish, for example.

Thirdly, since most students do not have extensive work experience, use applications that not only ask about the applicant's prior work experience but also about volunteer experience, background, and special skills.

Once you have carefully written job descriptions and ensured that job applications ask pertinent questions, be sure that when students turn in their applications you read them carefully and thoughtfully.

Once applications are received and you have carefully read them all, you must decide whom to interview. You should compare the applications with the job description and decide which students best fill your needs. Even if this job is a student's first work experience, he or she may still be a good employee. Are they involved in sports or volunteer work or do they make good grades? Any of these may indicate that the student is ready for that first job. Once you have chosen which students to interview, you should notify the students and set up interview times.

When interviewing prospective student employees, it is best to have more than one staff member participate in the interview. Having someone else's perspective on the candidate helps insure that different aspects of the student are considered.

When interviewing the candidate, ask questions and give tests that help ascertain if the student has the skills and knowledge you need. Although testing is sometimes viewed in a negative light, testing for specific skills such as expertise on software can be beneficial. Of course, just because a student does not have specific skills does not mean he or she cannot be trained later. You should decide before the interviewing process if you have the time to train a novice or someone with limited skills.

During the interview make sure to ask questions that encourage the student to do more than answer yes or no. Listen closely to the answers. If students do not expand on areas of interest to you, be prepared to ask more in-depth questions. Encourage the student to ask you questions.

Before the interview ends, give the candidate information about the library, its goals, and what the culture of the library is like. For example, is there a dress code? After the interview, check references. Many employers skip checking references, but you may be missing valuable information by omitting this step.

Now it is time to decide which students to hire. Again, you should compare the applications with the job description and decide which students best fill your needs. This decision should be made in concurrence with others who sat in on the interview. You should

keep in mind what Barbara I. Dewey said about hiring. Although she was not talking specifically about student employees, it still holds validity for this process. Dewey explains,

The decision to hire should not be based on initial impressions, gender, race, appearance, facile conversation style, or stylish manner. It should be based on appropriate background, educational level, work experience, and relevant personal characteristics that have been carefully defined by the employer in advance of the screening process. The final decision process draws on all material collected from the candidate including the results of the interview. This careful process should provide the institution with a reliable match between position and candidate and allow the institution the opportunity to present a favorable image of itself while conducting the job search. (Dewey, 1987, p. 96)

In summary, to hire the right student for your needs, you need to actively recruit students to ensure you get a diverse pool of applicants, have an accurate, detailed job description, carefully screen and interview candidates, and check references.

## **BRINGING STUDENT WORKERS INTO THE ORGANIZATION**

Team player, reliable, punctual, responds to uneven workflow, pays attention to detail, shows initiative, learns quickly, flexible and creative within context, self motivated, takes pride in work. These are just some of the characteristics of the ideal student employee. Indeed, these are characteristics of the ideal library professional. In some libraries, student employees are professionals-in-training, people who plan to become librarians or library staff. In many other libraries, student employees will enter other professions, and we hope they will return to use and support the library. In either case, our challenge as supervisors of student employees is to bring the students into the organization, to help them understand how their jobs fit into how the library works. The student employee who understands the big picture becomes the ideal student employee.

How can we meet this challenge? By doing what librarians do best: providing information and communicating. First, build a strong foundation by making your expectations clear and by helping the student employee develop reasonable expectations for the job. This starts with a clear and accurate job description. It is a good idea to review the job description on a regular basis to be sure it reflects the job as it changes over time. A statement of core principles and general performance expectations can also help the student

employee understand his or her role in the organization. Most new student employees do not really understand how a library works. An organization chart and the mission statement can help, as can a brief overview of the library's history. Consider providing each student with a copy of an orientation manual that contains the information described above and that also includes the names, titles and responsibilities of people the student employee should know (administrators, supervisors, co-workers).

A formal orientation to the library, including a tour of the entire facility with a behind-the-scenes look of all units, is as important as the training you develop to help the student learn the specific job he or she is hired to do. This orientation helps the student understand what a library really is, how things get done in the organization, and how his or her job contributes to the whole. This formal orientation welcomes the new employee to the organization and establishes the importance placed on the job and on the individual within the organization.

Next, build on this foundation by providing guidance to promote understanding and confidence. Most student employees cannot make the rules, yet they must abide by them. Therefore the rules are very important and understanding policies and procedures can help build confidence. The clear and timely communication of information is crucial to bringing and keeping the student employee in the organization.

Knowing a policy or a procedure provides only part of the picture. Understanding the reasons for a particular policy and understanding how procedure relates to policy completes the picture. Be certain that students are familiar with and understand the reasons for any and all policies that affect their jobs. Make sure they have access to copies of all policies, but especially those that directly impact their jobs. Review all the procedures students must follow and make sure they are clear and unambiguous. Provide written copies of any procedure that students have to follow. Help student employees make the connections between mission and policy and between policy and procedure.

Another challenge for the supervisor/manager is to devise effective communication strategies. We are all familiar with the staff meeting, written memos and other tried and true methods of disseminating information to staff. Today we can also take advantage of e-mail distribution lists or listservs to encourage two-way communication.

The impact of a role model on confidence and team building is often overlooked. Every single library staff member that a student employee observes is a role model -- negative or positive. The challenge for the

manager is to find ways to foster good relationships between regular and student staff. Be sure that other staff members know what your expectations of student workers are and encourage the staff to develop a working relationship with students based on mutual respect.

Finally, an assessment or review separate from an evaluation of job performance can be an important management tool. It is important to step back on a regular basis to ask, "How are we doing? How can we do better?" Of course, this will be most productive if the first two steps described above are taken because all parties involved in this assessment must share goals and objectives. This assessment can be an individual (manager and employee) or a group (manager and employees) process. This does not have to be formal. The purpose again, is to bring the student employee into the organization in a genuine way.

### **STUDENT WORKERS AND LIBRARIES: MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL**

Hiring student employees can be beneficial to both the student and to the library. The students profit because they have an opportunity to gain job skills as well as money. In the direct employer-employee relationship, student employees must learn to balance a work schedule along with school and other obligations. They may soon find that communication and actions have a different set of consequences in a work setting. Also student employees often have a flexible work schedule and a pleasant work environment. Working at a library is also a great resume-builder. But often what is offered to student employees goes beyond all of this. When describing what she liked best about her job, one student employee said she felt that her opinions and questions mattered. She was treated with respect as a person in a way that many of her peers in other employment did not receive (Swinson, 2003).

Student employees, however, are not the only ones to benefit by this working relationship. As a first or early employer, libraries have the opportunity to provide a positive new work experience. Librarians and support staff have the opportunity and obligation to serve as good role models in a positive work environment. Student employees have immediate contributions that they bring to a library. They have fresh eyes to trouble shoot new or existing procedures. Positive adjustments can follow simple questions such as, "Why do we do claims returns in such a time consuming way?" Student employees view our work environment through different lenses. Informed by what they learn from us, student employees can help us develop and grow so that the library remains vital and relevant. Students share their technical knowledge with staff. Students

also use their resourceful problem-solving skills to resolve daily occurrences and can bring practical applications of new technologies to the work place. The advantage might be as simple as teaching a keyboard shortcut, or as sophisticated as setting up a spreadsheet to compile foot traffic statistics. Libraries also gain better service for patrons, a more congenial workplace, and a chance to influence the attitudes and work habits of future colleagues or patrons. In addition, student employees are a rich resource pool for potential users, new librarians, and political funding/support. Student employees gain a respect for and a better understanding of the work of libraries. They know the collections and services that can be available and will feel comfortable accessing such resources. With few undergraduate programs for future librarians, libraries can be a great first training ground for new professionals. Libraries are often able to select the best and the brightest of competitive candidate pools, so very likely future library trustees, company CEOs, or local legislators are shelving in the stacks or checking out material at circulation.

### **CONCLUSION**

While administrative structure may need to be expanded to fit the unique student employee experience, working with student employees is in many ways similar to working with other library staff. It is still important to hire the right person for the right job and to help him or her feel an integral part of the organization. Although this may be time consuming, it is worth the effort because of the numerous benefits received from our association with student employees.

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