CHAPTER 8

Managing Graduate Student Workers in Theological Libraries

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Many theological libraries hire graduate student workers to help meet their staffing needs. These workers fulfill a vital role within the library, often staffing a large percentage of circulation/reference desk hours, performing circulation tasks and shelving books, contributing to special projects, and providing hospitality for patrons. They are the first point of contact for many patron questions and are sometimes the de facto face of the library to patrons. The vital function these student workers provide to the library requires seriousness concerning their orientation, training, and ongoing development. However, due to a higher level of turanover compared to permanent staff coupled with their student status, equipping them to succeed can be challenging. Many supervisors and librarians find it difficult to match their significant role with proper training and guidance.

This chapter explores these issues and recommends some basic best practices for operating an efficient student worker program in theological libraries. Topics covered include recruitment, hiring, and interviewing; orientation, training, and ongoing development; scheduling and assigning shifts; dealing with problems like poor

performance or unreliability; and inspiring them as partners serving the library's mission. The chapter draws upon scholarly literature in academic librarianship and a few case studies and concludes with a blueprint for operating an effective graduate student staff program at theological libraries, in which student workers are fully equipped to contribute to the library's mission.

First Steps

Before initiating a recruiting or hiring process, managers should have an updated job description for each graduate student worker position. Updating these files at the beginning of each hiring cycle, often at the beginning of each semester, ensures that the library aligns the positions with its broader mission and initiates clear communication of expectations to the potential staff. In many cases, working with your institution's human resources or student employment office can guide you in setting a job description's format, required elements, and pay scales for each position. Beyond these formalities, it is also critical for all managers to understand their legal obligations as supervisors concerning their relevant legal jurisdiction. These may include knowledge of anti-discrimination, pay, breaks, and confidentiality regulations that must be followed.

Recruiting and Hiring

Hiring well is perhaps the most influential aspect of a successful student worker program. Supervisors devote considerable time and energy to each employee, and employees are trusted to contribute significantly to the library's mission. For these reasons, hiring students with strong potential is critical (Stevenson and Vanier 2018, 209). Theological libraries rarely fire employees, so hiring the best candidates ensures that libraries use their limited resources to manage students effectively.

A fair application process should ensure all interested students can apply. Working alongside any institutional staff responsible for student employment increases the likelihood that you will start with a good pool of interested candidates. Too often, libraries hire

students without appropriate due diligence to ensure they get the best candidates. The initial hiring and recruitment process sets the tone and expectations for the rest of the employee's relationship with the library, so it is essential to be intentional (Rex and Whelan 2019, 32–33). Post job openings in official venues for student employment and wait to hire until all interested students can reasonably respond to the advertisement and apply. This is a handy tip at the start of an academic year, where many students may reach out through informal channels to inquire about working in the library. While these early birds may demonstrate initiative, other great candidates may wait until they arrive on campus and have begun orientation to campus life to learn about employment opportunities. Gather an applicant pool of sufficient size to your context before moving forward.

When interviewing, it is acceptable to keep the process relatively informal yet serious. An initial written application process can help hiring managers gather relevant data from students, like resumes, prior work experience, and a particular interest in the position. It can benefit managers and potential employees to interview all qualified candidates except for nonviable outliers. On the one hand, hiring managers gain practical experience in conducting interviews. On the other hand, students benefit from interview practice and can use it as part of their overall learning experience at your institution, regardless of the outcome. Look for candidates with either an existing skillset or the potential to develop the skills outlined explicitly in the job description, whether customer service-based or attention to detail with shelving/shifting, for example. When evaluating candidates, use the job description as a guide to what the ideal candidate looks like. Wherever possible, be transparent with the applicant about the number of spots available, the timeline for decisions, and the process for the next steps. Transparency early on sets the tone for effective regular communication for hired applicants.

Because libraries often rely on student workers to provide staff for the library's full open hours, hiring managers might be tempted to hire non-ideal candidates. This may be necessary due to your context, but in my experience, it is usually better to under-hire slightly if there are not enough quality candidates. As alluded to previously, it is unlikely that you will fire a mediocre or below-average performing student worker, and they often take up significantly above-average time and energy to manage. Suppose an applicant pool is not of high enough quality. In that case, it is usually better to under-hire and fill what would regularly be a student shift or project with professional

library staff. That arrangement is better for the library than being stuck with a student who is not a good fit for your library, as they will reduce library service quality to patrons and require more stressful supervision.

Onboarding and Initial Training

Getting new student hires to a place where they can succeed in their library jobs can be challenging. Libraries often have complex policies and widely varying patron groups. While no one-size-fits-all approach exists, one can glean general best practices from the existing library and information science scholarly literature and case studies. Managers can use backward design principles to construct a training program (Stevenson and Vanier 2018, 211). A well-written job description can also provide helpful guidance for an intentionally designed program for new hires. Viewing elements of the job description as end goals or objectives can allow managers to prioritize training elements and formats conducive to helping students learn the required skills and gain the necessary knowledge for the position.

Practically, training might entail creating circulation procedures handbooks, utilizing an online LibGuide or wiki format for easy accessibility and updating, one-on-one training with a supervisor, group training events at the start of the term, and the use of quizzes, role-playing, or other reinforcement mechanisms tailored to the diverse learning preferences of your hires. Delivering training materials in an online format can help minimize the time managers spend on training, especially if not all employees can attend a single training event due to scheduling difficulties (McKenna 2020, 78). If managers have the relevant technical skills, there may also be benefits to embedding graduate student worker training into your institution's learning management system or a paid tool, such as LibWizard. Managers can include written procedures and policies there, along with videos or links to external web pages helpful for student training.

Ensuring library policies, including those for performing the job and those regarding scheduling processes, work expectations, payroll, and so on, are in a written format can help students reference them as needed without relying on their memories or notes from a

verbal training session, which may be incomplete or misinterpreted. If they are easily accessible and updated, students can also reference these procedures on the fly during their shifts. Supervisors may also save time and make their employees more effective by allowing students to specialize in their job responsibilities. If only a smaller portion of student workers need to learn a particular process/procedure, managers can save time by assigning that training to only that smaller portion of workers. If specific students evidence an aptitude for a particular task, they can become the go-to experts whenever that task needs to be completed (Cady et al 2003; Mestre and Lecrone 2015, 1). As I will explain later, specialization also pays dividends for employee engagement.

I have had some success in my library by creating a "working with me" document that I share with all employees so they can anticipate my management style and expectations unique to my personality. This kind of document might, for example, include your preferred communication method, expectations, how you provide feedback, and basic "about me" information to help new hires learn how to relate to you best. Again, in all cases, written documentation goes a long way to setting clear, transparent expectations for the job.

Ongoing Supervision and Development

An initial training or orientation is, of course, never the end of the employee's development. Being honest about what a one-shot or initial training session can accomplish, just as you are in library orientations or instructional sessions more broadly, can ensure students grow over time, gaining the skills they need to be more effective workers. Utilize the pedagogical insights you have gleaned from other library instructional programming to make your student worker training more effective. Student workers need regular communication and frequent feedback to let them know how they are performing and whatever issues must be addressed. From experience, it is also critical to address any problems before they become a habit and a culture of permissiveness develops concerning subpar library service (Chung 2021, 35). It can be helpful, however, to reframe some of these issues less as problems to address and more as opportunities for ongoing development and reinforcement. It takes

time for students to become fully capable in any role in the library, so sequencing or appropriately pacing additional training is valuable.

Similarly, it is rarely apparent to the new employee how each element of their job fits together. They will develop new skills over time and only later make connections between their sometimes disparate responsibilities. Managers can aid this on-the-job learning process by being explicit about the value of the skills they are building both to perform their job well for the library and the transferable skills that will follow them back into the classroom or their post-graduation careers (Adeogun 2016, 18; Bischoff, Armstrong, and Waddell 2024, 261; Charles, Lotts, and Todorinova 2017, 13; Pierard, Baca, and Schultz 2022, 651). Working in the library provides students with critical thinking skills, enhanced information literacy, and time management skills that are a boon to their growth as graduate students (Mestre and Lecrone 2015, 17). They are students first, with vocational goals (usually) outside a library context. Elaborate on how the skills they develop inside the library will help them in their future vocations. Similarly, it can be helpful to intentionally design some job responsibilities or projects with these larger end goals in mind, assisting students in developing relevant skills for any context.

Clear communication is vital in the practical matter of assigning work shifts and projects. For institutions with greater numbers of graduate student workers, having a centralized method of keeping track of project progress and assignments is helpful. Several free digital tools, like Trello (which I use in my work), can help everyone be on the same page. More analog methods can function similarly, like a student worker task inbox/outbox in a shared location. It is a timesaver to track projects in a central place so that you are not trying to verbally keep track of each student's work individually, and this is especially useful when student shifts do not always match up with manager work shifts. For scheduling student shifts, larger libraries have had success with online shareable files using something like Google Docs, where students can volunteer for shifts themselves. However, for smaller libraries, a more manual process of gathering availability and assigning shifts is probably best to ensure maximum coverage. A manual process takes significant effort initially, but it can best align student worker shifts with library coverage needs. In all cases, aiming for consistent scheduling is crucial both for the students to plan around their academic and extracurricular activities and for managers to have regularity in their supervision duties.

Engagement

One of the most significant challenges managers face in theological libraries is how best to engage and motivate student workers. Indeed, one librarian wrote, "Many librarians and library staff members struggle to motivate their student employees and help them see their employment as a highly valuable, formative work experience" (Stevenson and Vanier 2018, 208). While I have briefly suggested aligning work assignments with student strengths, more can be said here. Much of the day-to-day work of a student worker role may consist of basic duties and recurring responsibilities, tasks that are not unique to the individual. Many libraries hire students primarily to staff a circulation desk and shelve books, with few other responsibilities. However, managers can increase the engagement level of their student workers and make progress toward broader library goals by involving these workers in more specialized library projects. There are always projects to be done in any library, and it is beneficial for managers to get creative in imagining how student workers could contribute to that work (Everett and Bischoff 2021, 418). Specialized library projects also allow students to utilize their unique skills and gain a greater variety of work experience, benefitting both employers and staff. Students who perform more specialized work feel a greater sense of ownership over their contributions and are more engaged (Sterling 2015, 23–25). They are more motivated in this case than if their responsibilities were narrowly limited to only basic functions.

Several case studies in the library and information science scholarly literature highlight the benefit of team-based projects in the library (Cady et al. 2023, 201). Libraries of any size could benefit from assigning shared work to a team of student workers. Often, students may be scheduled to work shifts by themselves without other student workers present. However, many students desire to collaborate with their fellow student workers on specific projects (Denda and Hunter 2016, 251). Even in cases where overlapping shifts are not possible due to staffing constraints, asynchronous shared student projects are more engaging for individual students and give them a chance to work together on complex, multistep projects, allowing them to contribute to the library's mission alongside each other. Working together gives everyone a sense of a shared mission and encourages everyone to invest more in the library's overall effectiveness.

Retention

Theological libraries sometimes struggle to retain student workers throughout their academic programs. In my experience, there are three primary, related causes of students choosing to leave library employment. First, nearly all graduate theological programs require their students to complete significant field education or ministry practicums outside of the classroom. These positions may include work in congregational settings or training for hospital chaplaincy. In reality, these are students' academic responsibility and they compete with other campus employment opportunities. This first cause is almost entirely out of the library's control, and managers would best be advised to work around these required training programs wherever possible.

The second, and related reason, for retention difficulties is that graduate theological programs are primarily vocational. Students are there for training and careers in ministry. For many students, they cannot see a clear application of the skills gained in library employment to their ultimate goal of working in ministry. Therefore, they will often leave library employment if they can gain job-related experience elsewhere that more closely aligns with their vocational goals. By heeding the best practices shared in the development and engagement sections of this chapter, managers can start to offer clearer pathways for students to gain meaningful job experience and skills that will transfer to other contexts, like ministry. Providing these opportunities will also increase your employees' intrinsic motivation (Fishbach and Woolley 2022, 343–47). While it is easy to ask student workers what kinds of experience and skills they hope to develop, it does take much more work for managers to identify library needs that will also fulfill their students' developmental goals. However, it is worth the effort to improve students' employment experience in this way.

The third reason for retention difficulties often derives from a lack of engagement or development while at work. If student workers are merely called upon to sit at the circulation desk, answer basic questions, and shelve books, those job duties will signal to them the relative (lack of) significance of their work. If library managers can offer more meaningful opportunities for students to creatively apply their existing skills and develop their experience in ways that also fulfill the library's mission, students will naturally shift their

views about their work. If students feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the library's mission in ways that make sense to them, they will be more likely to find ongoing value in their library employment.

Conclusion

By exploring the ideas presented in this chapter, managers have an opportunity to enhance their library's culture and provide a formative work experience that will follow students into their careers. The entire employment cycle, from identifying library needs and drafting job descriptions, hiring and training, supervising and assigning work, to providing meaningful growth and development opportunities, is essential as a whole. Each aspect contributes to the success of the others and to the overall experience. With this comprehensive view of a library's student employment program, library managers can thoughtfully design and execute a successful program for both the library and the student.

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