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### Supervising Younger Workers by Lauren Pressley

Student workers are important to libraries. Students do a lot of the routine shelving and filing, work at the circulation desk, help in technical services, and interact with patrons. Working in a library can encourage positive feelings towards libraries, help students learn how libraries operate, and spark interest in career opportunities in information services (Bard, 5-6).

What's more, the students that you supervise can go on to be your best marketers. They understand the library and what it has to offer and they will tell their friends. They may still be deciding what they'd like to do "when they grow up," and if you, as their supervisor, are friendly and committed to the field, you might just find your students following in your footsteps. Many library staff members get their start working in a library in these routine ways (Driggers & Dumas, 36).

Before your students become library experts and marketers, you as their supervisor have to create a positive working environment for them. Younger workers have unique needs; money and benefits aren't motivating factors for many of them. In my experience, it all comes down to relationships: build good working relationships with workers, and you will be a good supervisor. In these relationships you can learn about your students, show an interest in them, solicit ideas, and serve as a role model.

Before writing this article I presented on this topic at a statewide support staff workshop. While planning that presentation I spoke with fellow supervisors and found that most agreed that good supervision boils down to three points: administration, rewards, and communication.

#### Administration

Administrative practices are the foundation for any supervisory work. Administrative tasks include interviewing, hiring, training, supervising, evaluating, rehiring, and firing. Administration is the more tedious end of supervision; it requires paperwork, a clear understanding of institutional policy, and discretion. For the sake of brevity, this article will focus on interviewing and scheduling.

#### Interviewing

Interviewing will set the stage for good communication and teamwork. Therefore it is an extremely important task for supervisors. The short conversations you have with the student applicants give you an opportunity to select the most appropriate person to work in your department. It is important to structure the interview questions to help people self-select out of a job that is not a good fit. If you know that there will be a lot of shelving, and the person seems gregarious and easily bored, your questions can help the person realize that this is not the job for them (Driggers & Dumas, 71). An equally important lesson is to be honest and upfront throughout the interview. It's hard to not hire someone, but it's harder to fire the person later.

The interview also sets the tone of the library for the student. It gives the student an impression of you as a supervisor. Most lasting impressions are made during first two or three minutes of that initial conversation (Driggers & Dumas, 33). The interview will also give you time to learn about your potential future employee or volunteer. It is likely that you won't have another opportunity to talk at length about work experiences and goals with the student after the initial interview. Interviews are good times to elicit comments about personal and program level interests and goals (Driggers & Dumas, 13). You can use this information later when structuring work tasks for the student.

#### Scheduling

Young people aren't flexible. Their lives include school, family obligations, extracurricular involvement, and possibly other jobs. If workers feel their schedule in the library is bad, their work will be negatively affected, which can lead to making errors, quitting, or performance that necessitates firing.

I've had the opportunity to create schedules in many different ways. The techniques I've used (from most worker-centered to least) follow. What you can and want to do will fall somewhere along the spectrum.



Worker Created: In this scenario, you hold a meeting in order to pass the schedule around so that people can select their own shifts in a fair way. No one can complain about a bad shift as they've created their own schedule. However, it's a time consuming process for a larger staff, it benefits those who plan further ahead, and there will still be last minute shift trading. It may also be difficult to find a time when everyone can meet.

Worker Suggested, Supervisor Created: In this case students send a list of shifts they want as well as shifts they don't want, and the supervisor creates the schedule based on the requests of the students. This is easy for workers and most will get what they want, but it's very time consuming for the supervisor and you will need to apply fair rules so that those who do not get their desired shifts will realize that there is a reason.

Supervisor Created: This is when workers submit a list of only what they can't work and the supervisor creates a schedule from that information. This is extremely easy and quick for the supervisor, but you must be very careful that nothing can be construed as unfair, and many students will be assigned shifts that they do not want.

Even when creating schedules using a method that everyone considers fair, weekends will always be a problem. One solution is to have rotating weekend shifts where everyone takes the same number of hours. When I do this, I make sure to send out emails to remind the students before their weekend comes around.

### Rewarding

Students often do not have the same motivations as full-time library employees. Yes, many younger workers need money to pay tuition or to get the essentials, but they often do not rely on their employer for health insurance, benefits, and a salary. For this reason, it's important to consider what drives individual students to work to their best ability. Most of the time this is simpler than it seems.

If you have the budget, throw a pizza party. Students love free food and a casual environment. Our staff association pays for an end-of-the semester pizza party for all of our student workers. Staff members who want to participate pitch in with drinks and baked desserts. We all like the opportunity to sit and chat with our students, and it's amazing to find out what they're doing in their lives outside of the library.

If you lack the funds for a party, you can still offer rewards for your workers. You could make a basic card on your computer for student birthdays and get everyone in the department to sign it. You might let someone leave a little early if they've done all their work quickly. Even something as simple as complimenting a student on their work in front of "important people" is a kind of reward. It's one thing to let the student know they're going above and beyond; it's another to mention this to your boss in front of the student (Driggers & Dumas, 13). One of my clearest "warm-fuzzy" memories as a student worker in the library is from a time when I went to work with a cold. One of my supervisors made me ginger tea – and let me drink it in the library. That made a huge impact on me and I'm sure I was carrying that in the back of my mind when I was searching for jobs after college.

Another reward technique that is frequently overlooked is giving the students more appealing work. People expect to grow as a result of their jobs. For example, younger workers may want to learn more about computers, database searching, the Internet, customer service, or office software (Driggers & Dumas, 42). You can assign tasks to help students grow, you can allow them to select their own task from a list of options, or you can allow each student to become an expert in a specific area. Most student work is dull and tedious, but if students show interest, promise, and have been around for a few years, then maybe they're ready for more complicated work. If they're expressing any kind of interest in library school, consider giving them more challenging assignments in order to help them learn about the field and what they would be able to do with a library degree.

### Communication

We live in a communication-rich environment, and your students are used to using multiple modes of communication with their peers, family, and "authority figures." Good communication is critical to your success as a supervisor.

Communication is one way in which you can foster the feeling in your students that they are part of something bigger than themselves. If you communicate with your students about the larger issues facing the library, they will understand where they fit in the big picture. You can then solicit relevant patron information from the people who deal with them most often. You can allow students to be included in meetings, (limited) decision making, and you can let them offer suggestions about the department and their work.

In addition to the traditional one-on-one conversations, phone calls, memos, e-mail, listservs, meetings, handbooks, newsletters, and bulletin boards, you can use other communication tools to share information and receive it from your students. I've started doing a survey at the end of the employment period to find out what students liked and what they would have preferred. Because every student on our campus has a computer, I make heavy use of technology in communicating with my students. I use instant messaging and course management software such as Blackboard or WebCT to create communication spaces for our students.

Good communication lets workers know you're interested in them as people and as workers. Feedback through any channel shows concern for workers and their work (Driggers & Dumas, 34).

#### Supervising Redux

Supervising can be one of the most fun and challenging aspects for a new library staff member. You never know what situation you're coming into and you don't know what your students know or expect. However, with a little interest you can learn about them, and with good use of administration, rewards, and communication, you can create an atmosphere in which your students are happy and productive workers.

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