
Minions, Secret Weapons, Future Colleagues

Student Workers in Theological Libraries

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ABSTRACT Colleagues share insights into how we might harness the power and potential of our student workers (for good, naturally). We also consider best practices and cautionary tales related to hiring, scheduling, training, supervising, and retaining student workers. Finally, we commend student employment as a fruitful recruiting ground for potential future colleagues.

INTRODUCTION

Most theological libraries employ student workers in various capacities and for various tasks. Indeed, we could not offer the services or hours of operation we do without them. Far from being minions on whom we can fob off grunt work (like shelving), our student workers not only perform essential tasks (like shelving), but also offer a vital connection with the wider student body and can provide valuable insight into students' perceptions of the curriculum, workload, faculty expectations, and institutional effectiveness. They are our secret weapons. In this session, colleagues will share insights into how we might harness this power (for good, naturally). We will also consider best practices and cautionary tales related to hiring, scheduling, training, and supervising. Finally, we commend student employment as a fruitful recruiting ground for potential future colleagues. After all, many of us began our careers in theological libraries as student workers.

In addition to some practical ideas, we seek to offer a better way of thinking about our student workers, their role in the library, and the work they do, focused less on how many books they shelve (as important as that is) than on the connections they have with the wider student body. This is especially important as theological libraries become more collaborative communal spaces.

Our consideration of this topic is organized around five broad areas, each further elaborated with more specific questions.

ROLES/MISSION/PURPOSE

- 1) *How do you conceptualize the role of student workers?*
- 2) *What roles do your student workers perform?*
- 3) *How do your students further the mission of the theological library?*
- 4) *Ideally, what would you like to empower your student workers to do, or train them to do (beyond what they are already doing)?*

Marlon Patterson (MP): Student workers are a prime resource that enables our library to function and the library, in many respects, could not operate without them. The student workers fulfill the role of essential library functions. They contribute and further the mission of both the theological library and seminary by providing hospitality through assisting faculty, students, and staff with locating resources for class assignments and general research queries.

Currently, assigned tasks vary at each work shift and schedules are once a week due to our library structure. Ideally, offering a more consistent work routine along with additional schedules (i.e. more days per week but with shorter hours) might provide student workers the ability to develop a routine that could aid in work production.

David Schmiersal (DS): Beyond the obvious, day-to-day essential functions that our student workers perform to help keep the library functioning: circulation, shelving, staffing the circulation desk when full-time staff are absent, the most important roles our student workers perform are largely “under the radar.” Like a clerk in a good Renaissance story that might seem to be there simply to take notes or assist a character with a more impressive title, under the

surface and behind the scenes, they are playing a far more critical role: ambassadors and secret agents.

Our student workers are often the first, and sometimes the only members of the library staff that many of our patrons and guests encounter, and thus they largely determine whether our patrons have a positive experience of the library. If our patrons find our libraries places of hospitality and havens for study, reflection, and collaboration, this to a considerable extent is thanks to our student workers.

Moreover, like good secret agents, our student workers comfortably inhabit and transect two worlds: that of the library and that of the classroom. Since many of our student workers are also students at our institutions, they are able to provide insider information regarding assignments, expectations, and challenges facing our students that we can use to assist the entire student body. Since they are obligated to be in the library at certain times, they draw their friends and classmates into the library and can offer a more accessible point of entry into our collections and services. It is often less intimidating to ask a friend for help than to ask a librarian or faculty member. And since they know us better than other students, and know their fellow students better than we do, they provide a bridge between the library and their fellow students. I wonder how many times I have heard one of my students say, “you know, you should ask David about that.”

Vincent Williams (VW): At the Bishop Payne Library, we consider student workers the “face” of the library whenever they are working the circulation desk. They represent the library to patrons, and they are always the first point of contact when patrons have questions or need help using the library. Students all aim to maintain the library’s reputation for hospitality and competent service. They are also, in many ways, “peer coaches” in the sense that they can help their fellow students access and use the library since they know best how everything works. Our students also have a major role in allowing the library to be open as much as we are; they provide necessary desk coverage on evenings and weekends.

Our student workers perform many of the basic or routine circulation functions like checking in and out books, shelving, shifting, scanning materials, and doing shelf-reading. About 75% of their time

is devoted to working the circulation desk and 25% is dedicated to doing projects in the stacks or elsewhere. Some of our students work on more unique projects, depending on their background and skills. In the past, this has involved help with collection development, planning or organizing events, maintaining the library's social media accounts, setting up rotating book displays, or creating libguides.

Ideally, our library would create an environment where our student staffers contribute necessary work to the library while also gaining skills and experiences that are directly beneficial to their future careers. While much of the library-related work they do is transferable to other contexts, it is our goal to make that connection more explicit so that students feel their work is useful in the ways they already aim to grow during their time in seminary. In short, we have a goal of ensuring all of our student workers are part of an intentional and ongoing training program of mutual benefit to them and us.

HIRING AND RECRUITING

- 1) *How many student workers do you have on average?*
- 2) *What qualities do you look for in prospective student workers?*
- 3) *Have you had to dismiss any student workers?*

MP: Our library employment process concerning student workers may be different than many others. Student workers are assigned to work in the library by other administrative offices. Generally, we report how many workers we require for semester operations along with an overview of work expectations to the administrative offices. The personnel in these areas of seminary operations in turn utilize this information to assign workers to the library.

DS: When hiring student workers for the library, the two qualities that I find most desirable are (1) customer service experience, and (2) a demonstrated capacity to exercise independent, responsible judgement. As I tell our candidates, our primary role and purpose in the library is to provide excellent customer service to our patrons. While knowing how to find and use materials in our collection is important, I place greater emphasis on treating our patrons with

courtesy, professionalism, and respect. These are qualities that I strive to model.

When hiring student workers, I ask them to describe a time they have provided excellent customer service. I am especially inclined to favorably consider anyone who has experience working in food services or retail: if you can handle a restaurant or Walmart, you can handle a library.

Often, our students are scheduled to work in the evening and on weekends when I and other full-time staff are not present. Thus, the ability to make independent judgment calls is particularly important, since these students will need to be able to respond to situations in the moment. For example, they may need to decide to close the library if the power goes out or decide to make a reasonable exception to a policy to accommodate a special circumstance. I want our students to feel empowered to make these kinds of judgment calls, but I also want them to let me know they have done so, even if (especially if), in retrospect, their decision proves to be an error. This is why, in addition to asking candidates to relate noteworthy successes, I also ask them to describe a mistake and tell me how they responded and what they learned. In this way, I hope to let them know right from the start that I expect they will make mistakes from time to time and that this is okay, as long as they let me know so we can address any issues arising from such mistakes.

VW: In recent years, we have averaged about five to six student workers per semester. That compares to a permanent staff of nine in the library. In the coming semesters, we aim to replace a portion of our traditional librarian-on-duty rotation (full-time staff working evenings and weekends) with student workers, which will involve hiring additional students.

During the application and hiring process, we look for students who have experience in customer service or who demonstrate aptitude, as well as a willingness to perform some routine tasks or labor. Not everyone is comfortable in service settings; similarly, not everyone is suited for work like shelving or shifting, so determining these aptitudes is critical during our application and interviews. Additionally, we seek students who demonstrate self-reflection, timeliness, and initiative. During the semesters, our position is in relatively high demand. We receive about two or three times as many

applicants as we have positions available. We therefore require an initial application (using LibWizard forms). After reviewing applications, we conduct informal conversational interviews with candidates. For those to whom we wish to offer the job, we also always conduct a brief reference check with a former supervisor. The last step is critical, even though it may seem overkill for a basic student job. Asking a former supervisor, “would you hire this person again?” is an extraordinarily revealing question and helps us determine their likely job performance.

We have never, in recent years, dismissed or fired a student worker. We hire them on a semester-to-semester basis, so we have the opportunity not to allow them to continue. There have been many times when we have questioned our hiring decisions and wished we had hired someone else, but even in those cases, we generally will wait until the end of the semester or school year to make a personnel change. Most performance issues at our library are remedied with consistent communication of expectations and additional training.

TRAINING

- 1) *How much (initial) training do your students receive?*
- 2) *Do you use any programs or materials?*
- 3) *What do your students find most challenging to learn?*

MP: Training for our student workers begins the first day of work. A “building/ incremental” approach is taken towards instruction since student workers typically only work one day per week at our institution. This approach basically means that we “build” their knowledge base of the job by offering instruction/training at each shift until all responsibilities/duties are covered. Remembering everything in one session can be difficult, so the essentials are covered initially to ensure basic assistance can be offered to patrons on their first workday (i.e. check-out/check-in resources, locations in the library, where to locate instructions).

Two primary resources are used for training. First, a Library Worker Training Acknowledgement Form has been developed to assist with staying on task while conducting training. The form also provides student worker accountability. A sample form can be found at the end of this article. Second, instruction documents have been

created using Google docs. These documents provide both pictures and verbiage that is easy to follow. Links to the instructions have been placed on the bookmarks bar so that student workers can easily access them at any time. Should additional questions or difficulties arise, student workers are encouraged to ask for guidance and clarification.

With these resources and approach, challenges in training have been minimized. However, student workers face a different challenge: remembering. Working once a week is not conducive to training retention. Therefore, repetition, repetition, repetition is something that both the supervisor and student worker must get used to.

DS: I confess that as a supervisor, training is definitely an area that leaves room for improvement. I spend at least a couple hours with each student individually when they are first hired, going over the basics from LC classification to emergency response, but this somehow feels both inadequate and overwhelming (and a bit dull) simultaneously. I have created a training document that covers all of this, but I am not sure how often it is used, or how helpful it would be if it were. I think the challenge is twofold: (1) many of the things that I try to teach in the initial round of training are deceptively simple, yet prove confusing (e.g., LC call numbers), and (2) often there is a considerable time-lag between my instruction and the first opportunity to apply the information in a “real world” setting (for example, if a patron returns a lost or damaged book).

Fortunately, we have been able to schedule students when I am also working, and my office is located directly behind them (with an open window between), so it is fairly easy to review procedures when students have forgotten or provide answers to questions that I failed to consider in my initial training. Moreover, as one of our colleagues has said, very few people have died on a library table. When students are uncertain, they simply make the best decision they can and leave me a note letting me know. This allows me to correct any error that may have been made and offers a further opportunity for “in the moment” training that is more immediately obviously relevant. As McGuinness observes, rather than a one-time event, it is helpful to think of student staff training as an ongoing, iterative process “that may have to occur in the middle of whatever

work that I'm doing, requiring me to be flexible and responsive to student staff needs" (McGuinness 2014).

VW: At the beginning of the Fall semester, we aim to do a group-based training for all the new hires. This helps reduce staff workload in training each student individually. We also find that group-based instruction helps motivate and encourage the students to work together to learn and find solutions to their problems. This is conducted, typically, on a weekend for a few hours. Subsequently, our User Services staff will work alongside new students for their first few desk shifts, doing both additional circulation-related training and providing supervision of their first efforts to service patrons. For tasks like re-shelving, we have color-coded flags that students place in the books in the stacks so that library staff can go around and check their re-shelving work. This has been very useful as it both helps ensure that students are fully trained and it reduces the pressure they feel in potentially losing a book when they are attempting to reshelve for the first time. Once they have passed their checks a few times, they will be trusted to reshelve normally.

In terms of documentation, we maintain a circulation guide as a quick reference sheet for basic questions or troubleshooting. Student workers can consult this and read it to refresh their memory on certain procedures. User Services staff have an office directly behind the circulation desk, so they can also hear or see many issues, and they can be easily called upon to help students at the desk who may be unsure of what to do. Over time, we try to slowly add to students' skillset with an ongoing training program, teaching them more "advanced" library skills in the months after they begin work.

While we have circulation policies and a relatively small patron base, we find there are still many gray area cases for which students are often unsure what to do. There are many if-then types of scenarios that our students struggle to learn perfectly. That is the nature of library circulation, so simple and consistent communication is key. The library staff shares responsibility for staffing the circulation desk, so we train students to refer patrons to other library staff when necessary or to enlist the help of User Services staff to address complex patron questions or issues.

SCHEDULING

- 1) *What tools do you use to schedule and manage student workers?*
- 2) *Do you schedule by week, month, semester?*

DS: Scheduling can be a bit of a challenge, as it involves balancing the needs, expectations, desires, and convenience of our students with the need to ensure that the library is adequately staffed while maintaining a sustainable budget, and the fact that I only can and should devote so much of my time to creating and updating the schedule.

I have found it works well, both for me and for our students, to create a schedule on a semester-by-semester basis. This allows our students to have a consistent schedule based on their classes and other commitments. I use a Google calendar that I share with all my student workers and our full-time staff. I assign each student a color so it is fairly easy to tell at a glance who is scheduled and where there are gaps. When students let me know they will be unable to come in for a given shift (either due to a planned absence or last-minute emergency or illness), I change the color to grey to show that the slot is available for someone else to take, and to remind me that I will need to make sure that I or someone else will be available to cover the desk.

This brings up another important point to bear in mind: our students are whole human persons who have lives and commitments outside the library. While it is reasonable to set expectations, I find it is also helpful to be a little flexible where possible. For example, I have never found that chastising someone for being ten minutes late is an effective remedy for tardiness. I have instead found that extending a measure of grace can increase motivation to continue working in the library. If I am going to be out of the office, I will ask my students to make an extra effort to be on time and able to open the library on time.

VW: At the beginning of each semester, we create a master weekly schedule. This will become the base schedule for every subsequent week in the semester, so students always have consistent days and times they come in to work. I use free or low-cost scheduling software popular in food service or retail to build the schedule based

on the availability I collect from the student workers. These almost always need to be adjusted as students register or drop classes at the start of the semester, and the schedule must be updated accordingly. It takes at least two or three attempts before the master weekly schedule works for everyone. We generally have more than enough students to ensure that there is at least one available to work every needed shift.

RETENTION

- 1) *What can we do to encourage and motivate our students to continue working in the library?*
- 2) *How can we help our students see their work in the library as an extension (or application) of their theological education?*

MP: Our student workers are fond of working in the library. While there is great joy, sometimes as they work towards fulfilling their call they may become a sacristan in the seminary chapel. Accepting this position means that they will no longer be able to work in the library. Other students may also get reassigned to other work study positions on campus during their course of matriculation. To provide some sort of retention, the library developed a student worker subs list of former library workers. These students then can still be maintained as a source of contact to fill emergency shifts or other support when they are available.

DS: Creating and maintaining a positive work environment in which students feel valued as people is one vital way to encourage and motivate them to continue working in the library. In addition, as McGinnis asserts, their work in the library “should not be disconnected from other areas of life and study” (2014). For our students, this can mean anything from encouraging them to assist their fellow students with Greek vocabulary while they are working at the circulation desk to recognizing that their more personal conversations with fellow students can offer opportunities to practice the pastoral care skills they have been learning. This can help them see on a broader level that the work of the theological library is not and should not be disconnected from the work of the church or their call to serve in ministry of some kind or in some capacity. All our students (and all of us) are in the process of becoming and it is important for us to

see our students' work in the library as an opportunity for personal growth and maturation.

VW: Retention is a challenge at our library because students often spend a significant amount of time at their field education sites beginning in their second year of seminary. For those students, there is not much that can be done to retain them in the library. For others, we strive to ensure they have unique responsibilities in the library that leverage their background and skill set. In that way, they feel that their contribution to the library is valued. Similarly, we aim to create a positive atmosphere in the library where everyone contributes in various ways. It is truly a team effort, and no task is ever relegated solely to the students. Our regular library staff also do reshelfing and shifting, for example. This sets the tone for students' contributions and helps them feel part of a wider team.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we would like to share insights into the importance of student workers shared by one of our forebears in the profession in the early years of Atla's existence. Henry M. Brimm offered the following remarks as part of an evening address he gave at the ATLA Annual Conference (now Atla Annual) in Chicago on June 16, 1954:

Therefore, blessed is the librarian who must depend upon the services of a numerous staff of student assistants. Irresponsible some of them may be. Unskilled, unobservant, and uninterested most of them are at first—a problem to schedule, a task to train, a chore to supervise. All this. But invested in this group, the librarian's time and effort and patience and affection will yield dividends out of all proportion. Efficient, industrious, dependable workers will be but a part of the return—the smaller part. When he has won, and influenced the members of his student staff, they will become for the librarian an incomparable agency for reaching, and winning, and influencing the student body. And they will serve as his emissaries without prompting. (Henry M. Brimm 1954)

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SAMPLE FORM

Library Worker Training Acknowledgement Form

The following list of training/instructions concerning employment duties and responsibilities were either offered or provided so that I might know how to efficiently perform job tasks that will be assigned or required of me during my time as a library worker at the Library:

_____ EMERGENCY PROTOCOL

_____ Location of Instructions & Signing in to Google account

_____ Securing the facility

- Open and Closing procedures

_____ Koha library management system use

- Check-in instructions
- Check-out instructions
- Interlibrary Loan Check-out instructions
- Library Card Instructions
- Placing Hold Instructions
- Pulling Hold Instructions
- Renewal/ Set New Due Date Instructions
- TexShare Card Instructions

_____ Paycom & Google Work Calendar

- How to log my hours worked
- How to access the work calendar to verify if I'm on the schedule
- Shift swaps and Filing shifts
- Protocol to follow when the person assigned to work with me does not show

_____ Basic search capabilities to assist library patrons with attempting to locate desired resources.

- Basic search capabilities means that I can:
 - Enter in search terms into Seeker or the Koha Catalog
 - Locate the call number to resources
 - Navigate to digital resources so that they can be read in

the web browser

- Illustrate to patrons how to set limits on their search results

_____ Donation processing

_____ Shelf read and shelve resources

_____ Stamp and sticker print resources that are being added to the collection

_____ Phone

- Answering
- Taking a message
- Transfer
- Dial out

I also acknowledge that the lack of a physical demonstration (i.e. - hands on example) of any of the aforementioned duties and responsibilities does not exempt me from fulfilling my work tasks. Where a physical demonstration was not presented I have been given direction to where written instructions can be accessed for review. If after my training and if after I have also read instructions, I find that I am in need of additional clarity I will:

- Ask my supervisor or other full time library personnel for assistance before performing the task
- Notify and explain what part of the written instructions were unclear and that I had difficulty following

I further acknowledge that as a library worker I am aware that I have the ability to access personal information of library patrons. However, I will not use or divulge library patron's personal information for any purposes other than what is necessary to fulfill job duties as a library worker. I will keep all library patron's information safe and confidential. I will make sure to logout of library worker accounts to maintain this security.

Lastly, I acknowledge that I am aware that policies and procedures for performing specific tasks may be amended or updated. I will make the necessary personal adjustments to continue to fulfill work tasks

assigned to me. I am here to work and keep the library functioning to the best of my ability.

Name of Library worker:

(PRINT) _____ (DATE) _____

(SIGN) _____ (DATE) _____

Librarian Supervisor

(PRINT) _____ (DATE) _____

(SIGN) _____ (DATE) _____