

Management Problems of Student Workers in Academic Libraries

This paper analyzes the problems related to the management of student workers in academic libraries. It reviews relevant literature in library science and in management theory, with special emphasis placed on an understanding of what motivates student workers and on the valuable contribution they may make in the academic library. Finally, suggestions are offered relative to the hiring, training, and supervision of student workers.

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN both pro and con on the use of student workers in libraries.¹ A review of this literature reveals a lack of application of management theory, especially that of organizational behavior, in handling student personnel problems. The literature does show, however, that librarians are concerned with increasing the effectiveness of student workers in their organizations. In order to encourage better performance from student workers, there is a definite need to understand and deal with motivational processes and styles of supervision as they relate to the student.

As a result of cultural conditioning, people today, including students, expect more satisfaction from their jobs, increasing responsibility and autonomy, and participation in decision making.² Thus the problems associated with student workers are not unique to libraries but potentially exist in any organization. It is important that these problems are not perceived as unique and that one makes use of the body of information available in organizational behavior to propose solutions.

BACKGROUND

In the library, students are low on the

organizational chart, either because they are students or because they are part-time employees or for both reasons. This creates problems of integrating student workers into the organization in terms of the attention they receive from top-level management. They are seldom perceived as a valuable resource because of the nature of the work they do, their large numbers, or because they are replacements for full-time personnel. As a result, student assistants have little or no participation in the decision-making processes, even those that directly affect their work. It is not surprising then that they either do not understand or are not committed to the library's goals.

This noncommitment is unfortunate when one realizes that student assistants are indispensable to the goal of providing maximum service to library users. Not only do they perform essential tasks, they also enable the library to function in satisfying the demand for long hours of operation. In this respect they are highly visible and often represent the library to the user. Moreover, as a result of their peer relationships with student library patrons, the student assistants in public areas are often asked questions. If they do not know the answers or, even worse, give wrong information instead of directing the patron to a librarian, the library is not serving its purpose.

Thus good professional librarians are not sufficient to make an academic library func-

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tion efficiently; all employees—librarians, paraprofessionals, clerks, and student workers—must be aware of the library's goals and be committed to service if the library is to meet the needs of its users.

PROBLEMS

The hiring of student assistants is somewhat unique since there often exists a preselected pool of student employees. Student employees may be preselected either by the financial aid office or the student placement office.

In recent years the federally funded College Work Study Program has provided the funds for a larger and larger percentage of student workers. At St. John's University over half of the 700 or more students employed are part of this program. This is beneficial to the students because it is a means of helping them keep loans to a reasonable level, but as a result the university employs students in situations where other institutions might hire more full-time non-students.

From this pool of students, various departments on campus vie for student help, e.g., administrative offices, academic departments, food service, and the library. It is important that the library establish and enforce criteria for the selection process based on ability and willingness to perform the tasks.

This selection process is even more critical when considering the contemporary academic library's expansion into fields other than printed matter. For example, many academic libraries are utilizing technologies involving elaborate media equipment and computers. Because of such special library services, it is even more difficult now to hire qualified student assistants.³

The goals of providing maximum service and efficient operation cannot be achieved in libraries employing a large number of student assistants unless there is an adequate training procedure. Past experience has shown that student help is notoriously inefficient without proper training.⁴

Unfortunately, the task of training student workers has been a relatively low priority, often delegated to junior members of the staff. As a result, people with little or no

knowledge of training techniques are responsible for training and communicating the goals of the library. A common result of such training is the inability of student workers to understand their role in helping the library to achieve its goals. Oftentimes students view their work as merely "busy work" and consequently perform poorly.

Supervision of student assistants is also often handled by people with little or no previous supervisory experience or training. This might be just as true of professional librarians as it is of nonprofessional staff members. Supervision is even more difficult when one considers the number of student workers reporting to one person and the physical distance that often separates student workers from their supervisors. There are also problems of scheduling around student class hours and having student workers on the job evenings and weekends when supervisors are not present or, in some cases, when none of the full-time staff are on duty.

Many of the problems discussed in terms of training and supervision result in motivational problems for student workers. They are given tasks that they often perceive to be unimportant or trivial when in fact they are not. Additionally, the library is not and should not be the primary concern of the student. Lack of commitment and unawareness of the relationship between the job being performed and overall library goals often result in poor performance on the part of the student.

Too many student workers feel the college or university owes them a job and view the library as an easy place to earn their "work award." This view is only reinforced when the full-time staff of the library perceive the student work force as a dumping ground for unwanted tasks.

RELATED THEORY AND RESEARCH

The concepts of motivation have been increasingly utilized in organizations, including libraries, in an effort to improve employee performance, increase productivity, or increase employee satisfaction. Behavioral scientists have contributed much to the understanding of motivational behavior in organizations. The underlying tenet of

much of the work dealing with motivation is that individual behavior is goal-directed. That is, behavior is influenced by individual goals along with the individual's perceptions of how these goals can be achieved.⁵

The literature of management tends to view employees as individuals who work full-time for an organization. Such full-time employees are committed to work as a long-term career rather than a short-term job; with student workers the position is just a short-term job. Recently both Gannon and Morse have researched the growing number of employees whom they regard as peripheral employees.

Morse defines the peripheral worker as one who has had work experience of any kind other than full-time for a full year.⁶ Gannon further explains the characteristics of the peripheral worker "as having only a partial commitment to the organization, views work not as a career but as a job that can easily be discarded, and as secondary to other activities."⁷ This description closely parallels that of the student worker.

Studies of peripheral employees conducted by Gannon reveal that peripheral employees are not motivated by job-related attitudes. "For such individuals, the job seems to be such a minor source of remuneration that it can virtually be eliminated from their perspective and outlook."⁸ The policy implications from Gannon's studies suggest that managers of peripheral employees, including library supervisors, should be aware of the fact that new motivational techniques might be necessary for such employees.

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

As noted earlier, the problems associated with hiring student assistants are somewhat unique since the library must often deal with a preselected pool of employable students as a result of university policies for the distribution of grants-in-aid. The library should develop clearly defined internal policies for the selection of student assistants from this externally generated pool.

The primary criterion should be the student's ability and willingness to perform library tasks. Consideration of the student's academic standing will indicate the ability to devote time to library work, while consider-

ation of the student's special interests and previous work experience may be helpful in determining the specific tasks to be performed.⁹

The number of hours per week the student is available for work should be a criterion in the selection process. Ten hours per week is generally regarded as a minimum, while even better results can be obtained if no student is employed for less than fifteen hours per week.¹⁰ This is a difficult criterion to apply since it is dependent upon wage rates and the university's decision on the number of awards versus the size of the awards.

Finally, prospective student employees should be interviewed to ascertain whether they can fulfill the established criteria. If there is no personnel officer within the library, a prospective student employee's immediate supervisor and a senior librarian should conduct the interview. The time spent and choice of a member of the staff high in the organization should communicate to students that they are important resources in the library operation and that as individuals they are valuable to the organization.¹¹

The problem of supervising student workers in academic libraries can be analyzed in terms of a behavioral model for effective leadership. Such a model, House's path-goal model, stresses that the functions of a leader are to clarify the nature of the task, reduce roadblocks from successful task completion, and increase the opportunities for subordinates to attain personal goals. To the extent that the leader accomplishes these functions, the motivation of subordinates will increase.¹²

House's model further stresses that the type of leadership style varies according to the situation. Research has indicated that workers performing routine tasks have reported high job satisfaction when their immediate supervisor uses a supportive leadership style. Individuals operating in an unstructured task environment are more productive when their immediate supervisor uses a more directive leadership style.¹³

Student assistants in academic libraries have the long-range goal of obtaining an education. Therefore, work in the library is basically a short-run goal or, in Gannon's

terms, secondary to other activities. Library work gives the student the financial resources necessary to obtain the desired education. Supervisors who recognize this goal relationship will tend to develop a supportive leadership style expressing concern for the student's needs and goal achievement. In effect, the student's supervisor has a "dual function of seeing the student as both worker and learner."¹⁴

Clarifying the nature of the task will come about through the implementation of clearly defined training procedures. Hollman's study of orientation procedures in industry suggests the division of a training program into two distinct phases: general orientation and specific training.¹⁵

The general orientation should include: (1) a description of the library's function on campus, including all types of service it provides, its basic goals, and an introduction to all full-time personnel; (2) an outline of policies and procedures for reporting to work, absences, and safety information; and (3) a floor plan or description of the physical layout of the library.

Methods for transmitting this information can be verbal, written, audiovisual, or some combination of the three. The technique used will depend upon the number of students involved, along with the time the library administration can devote to the preparation of the orientation session.

Once the general orientation session is held, the students can be divided into groups for specific training to include (1) introduction to the tasks to be performed, including objectives and how they relate to overall library service and (2) the specific training needed.

The specific training should be conducted by the student's immediate supervisor and is usually in the form of verbal instruction. The use of verbal instruction at this point will enable the supervisor and the student assistant to establish a two-way flow of communication at the outset. The student assistant should be able to ask questions and receive immediate feedback to clarify the nature of the work to be performed.

In terms of training, the supervisor takes on a combined leadership style that is both directive and supportive by relating the importance of these tasks to the library's serv-

ice goals. Once the training procedure has been completed, the most effective leadership style will lean toward one that is supportive.

As mentioned previously, much of the work performed by student assistants in the library is routine in nature. There is little intrinsic satisfaction obtained from the actual performance of the tasks. However, a supportive supervisor can provide student assistants increased extrinsic satisfaction in terms of the work environment created and the interpersonal relationships established. Students certainly have the ability to perform library tasks, and a supportive supervisor will communicate that the responsibility for completion of these tasks belongs to the student.

If the training procedure has clarified the importance of the tasks in the overall operation of the library, students should have some perception of how their duties in the library help to achieve the organizational goals of maximum and efficient service. If the service goals of the library have been effectively communicated, student workers will also recognize the value of the library to their primary goal of learning.

In addition, student workers may be able to provide valuable input into how these services can best be delivered to other patrons. The supportive supervisor will recognize the dual role of the student worker as both worker and patron and remain open to suggestions for better service.

CONCLUSION

Student workers are a critically underutilized resource in many college libraries. Current management theory combined with common sense and an awareness of the problems can make library work an enjoyable learning experience for the student worker. It is crucial, however, that librarians be involved in the process of hiring student workers, that they develop adequate orientation and training procedures, and that they enable student workers to perceive themselves as important members of the staff. All those who supervise students should be encouraged to develop supportive styles of leadership. From the top down, the student worker must be recognized as a valuable human resource.

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