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Investing in Student Employees: Training in Butler University's Information Commons Program

By Amanda D. Starkel

Student employees have been called the unsung heroes of most modern academic libraries. As the roles of librarians have shifted, the role of the student employee has too changed. They have been asked to take on more duties such as staffing the primary service point, handling circulation and reference, shelving, digitization.

Some librarians feel concerned that students are now responsible for tasks that used to fall under their purview. As the line between "librarian work" and "student employee work" has been blurred, expectations for student employee performance have gotten progressively higher. Supervisors responsible for the management and training of student employees feel increased pressure to ensure that student employees are capable of these. When expectations are not met, members of the library staff worry that levels of service are decreasing. Over time, this pressure builds and "supervisors run the risk of not only the inefficient use of valuable resources, but also a bad employment situation for the student, the supervisor, and the library" (Kathman & Kathman, 2000, p. 176). This is not cost-effective or beneficial for any of the involved parties. Libraries want to provide what Scrogam and McGuire call "an opportunity for involvement that is both meaningful and educational while assisting them in becoming successful members of an increasingly global society" (as cited in McGinniss, 2014). How can an environment be created where student employees meet high expectations and successfully accomplish all that is ask of them? Butler University has been successful with a unique approach to student employment known as the Information Commons (IC) program.

Background Information: The IC Program

The IC program was born from a natural partnership between Butler University Libraries and the Center for Academic Technology (CAT). The libraries were investigating the trends of having students begin to staff the reference desk. Instructional technology services offered by CAT were growing in demand on campus, and librarians were seeing more demand for classroom instruction and support within certain disciplines.

Both parties found value in having a group of students who were cross-trained in research, technology, and customer service to assist with consultation and meet these needs. Beyond these initial motivations, both departments wanted to create a program that focused on the professional development of

students and connected to the larger student learning outcomes of Butler University. This distinction has been key in setting Butler's IC program apart.

The IC student handbook explains the expectations of the library's professional program. When students are on the clock, they are to be focused on work tasks, they are expected to act and dress professionally. From the very beginning, it is clear: this is not an average part-time on-campus job.

The Information Commons program is a unique opportunity to grow professionally and gain practical, in-demand skills. Butler University is fortunate to be able to offer a higher wage than the state minimum, an annual wage increase and opportunities for advancement. The initial offer of employment rolls from semester-to-semester. As long as students are meeting expectations, they can count on employment with the university library throughout the remainder of their academic careers. The library is flexible with scheduling and offers the potential for summer employment. Outstanding students within the program can be promoted as supervisory students, a role that provides leadership and management experience and an increased wage. However, a higher wage and ongoing employment is not always enough to convince students to adhere to our higher standards. It is important for students to buy into the value of the program, both for retention and motivation purposes. The mission of the program is discussed during the hiring process, training, staff retreats and socials, and in group and individual meetings. We take every opportunity to encourage students to internalize these values and connect them to their own personal goals.

From the beginning, the IC program strived to mirror the values of Butler University as a whole. Butler University is a liberal arts institution committed to "providing the highest quality of teaching and achieving the highest ideals of student learning, which include clear and effective communication, and appreciation of beauty and a commitment to lifelong learning, community service, and global awareness" (Butler University, 2013).

Butler's nine university learning outcomes include similar elements focusing on information literacy, collaboration, diversity, and service. The IC program has been aligned to these larger institutional goals so that the program will be "an integral component of a student's academic experience and

career arc” (Michael, 2013, p. 6). The library looked beyond their own institution to trends within higher education as a whole. The IC program exemplifies several LEAP High-Impact Educational Practices, including collaborative projects and experiential learning (Kuh, 2008). It also fits in well with the current movement to optimize the student employment experience.

Additionally, the library has recently worked to align the program to Butler Libraries’ 2013-2016 strategic plan. The six goals of this strategic plan relate to library instruction, resource allocation, learning spaces, outreach, and scholarly communication. The training and job experiences that IC students undergo helps achieve several of these goals.

Due to the success of the IC program, library administration felt confident in moving forward with a plan to consolidate service points in the fall of 2014. This merger allows for resource re-allocation and provides opportunities for opening up new learning spaces. The library hopes to provide opportunities, in the future, where IC students can offer insight and play a role with outreach and ongoing scholarly communication efforts.

The library is committed to these core values within the program, and must accomplish their day-to-day tasks and ensure that students are meeting service expectations. The assistant director of CAT manages the CAT side of this, and the Information Commons librarian manages the library side. Within the library side, student employees are responsible for a wide range of reference, research, and technology questions in face-to-face consultations at the Information Commons desk and virtually. Student workers need to understand how to search by topic, find specific titles, locate items in the stacks, assist with printing and copying, answer questions about citation, and more. This ongoing list of responsibilities is lengthened by the skills that student employees will have – information literacy concepts such as the ability to help develop a topic or understand creative commons and the basics of copyright.

Training: Revamp

Upon the hire of a new Information Commons librarian in August 2013, it was decided that a revamp of the student training process highest priority; “If librarians wish to have a more adequate level of service, a top priority for student employee supervisors should be to devote time to the planning and implementation of training programs” (Kathman & Kathman, 2000). From the outset, we decided it was important “each student would receive the same training and thereby eliminate inconsistencies and reduce the time commitment involved with individual training” (Manley & Holley, 2014, p. 77). Several IC student supervisors were instrumental to this process; they offered insight about the needs of the service point and the program. They also generated great ideas about activities for and methods for training. All aspects of this revamp focused on creating intentional learning opportuni-

ties based upon methods that have seen success within other instructional venues.

Butler University is a residential college with a mostly traditional-age student body; nearly all of the students within the IC program are of the millennial generation. As such, they are “‘hands-on’, experiential learners” who “expect to deal with multiple formats and media” (Zink, Medaille, Mundt, Colegrove, & Aldrich, 2010, p. 112) Millennials are highly visual and social, and appreciate project work that engages them in collaboration (Zink et al., 2010). Traditional library instruction sessions have shown that students learn best through active learning exercises that they feel are relevant to their lives. This led library staff to create competency-based activities that incorporated text, videos, and graphics for the delivery of information. Students are asked to read, watch, listen, act, respond, and create. Opportunities are created for interaction, and student supervisors facilitate and mentor their peers throughout this process. They are prompted to reflect and make connections between the skills they are learning, their work within the program, and their lives outside of work. Student workers are able to go through the work at their own pace, and are encouraged to revisit trainings at any point in the process. Many exercises allow freedom to express creativity or customize the training in ways that add meaning. Intentionally working all of these elements into the revamp helped to create a more genuine learning environment and a more invested student employee.

During the first few weeks of employment, IC new hires undergo extensive training. Training for both sides of the program is housed in Moodle, the campus’ learning management system. Using Moodle has been advantageous for all; it is accessible to students and supervisors in both locations, it allows for self-directed progression, and makes it easy to add or update content. Content has been ordered deliberately so that the most important concepts will be addressed first and the trainings will continue to build on each other. The following is a sampling of the training activities for the library side of our Information Commons program:

Training: First Shifts

A student supervisor or the Information Commons librarian is present during the first shift or two to physically walk the student around the space. This allows new hires to feel supported and establish mentorships with their supervisors from the beginning. A checklist is provided for consistency in the orientation. Highlighting all support resources (both online and in person) is a key.

Training: Basic Tasks (implemented through Moodle)

Reviewing and practicing policies and procedures: Every IC student worker must be familiar with policies and procedures. These are housed on a private LibGuide, and during training,

IC students must read through the instructions about the statistics tracking system, dealing with technical issues, answering virtual reference questions, and handling emergencies. This part of training is followed by hands-on activities. These activities, including simulations of answering phone calls, emails, and chat questions, are set up in Moodle so that they provide immediate feedback.

Getting familiar with library spaces

The Butler University libraries wanted to give students an opportunity to explore their workspace on their own. Students were given blank floor plans for the entire library, and are asked to use free time on shift to explore the library and fill out the plan as they see fit. Students are asked to pay particular attention to areas such as, study spaces, restrooms, collections, etc. Many students appreciate the chance to learn about the building and express a little creativity.

Training: Research Skills (implemented through Moodle)

Using Google & Google Scholar: It is important for students to feel confident with all the resources available to them, especially Google tools that may be used throughout the rest of their lives. Training on these concepts accounts for various confidence levels so students research and familiarize themselves with Google and Google Scholar as they feel necessary. Then, students take a short five-question quiz, which asks about Google's ranking system, limiting searches by type of site, forward reference searching, and the advantages and disadvantages of Google Scholar. Many students found these questions were difficult to answer quickly. Therefore, each question gives an immediate explanation and often includes links to learn more or see demonstrations of the concepts discussed.

Testing retrieval skills: IC students are responsible for helping patrons find specific items, therefore they need to be very competent at information retrieval. Training for this concept is two-pronged. Students first learn about our most-used resources (catalog, PRIMO, Journals A-Z) by reading background information about the tools, watching demo videos, and trying out guided searches, then, they are asked to complete an activity in which they are given citation information for five different sources (note: the citation is not always complete or correct). Students must search and determine if the book or article is available through the library, available freely online, and/or blocked by an Internet paywall. The activity offers feedback after every question, and explains concepts like embargos and why it's important to know how to work from an incomplete citation.

Using databases: Before creating training for this concept, it was agreed upon that it is preferred to have students become familiar with a few databases and the transferrable skills of database searching than to have them do dry point-and-click training on every database in our collection. Therefore,

training asked students to self-select one of the most popular databases, thoroughly explore it, and then create a LibGuide page about it. The LibGuide is private, but students were directed to create a product that could be used elsewhere in the library. Students are encouraged to select a database that is new to them, and are asked to look at other pages on the guide and compare them. Reflections after completing this activity showed that students learned more about the database collection and made connections between these tools and academic work.

Training: Information Literacy (implemented through Moodle)

Understanding our users: Far too often in training, focus is placed on the "finding" part of the research process and time discussing the beginning steps of research is neglected. This aspect of training has students think holistically about research as a process. It also asks them to think about the implications of technology on their research and educational processes. Students must participate in two different forums. In the first forum, they study and reflect upon the most recent ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology. In the second forum, students view a video and an infographic containing national data on college research habits from Project Information Literacy. Students then reflect on how being aware of this data can help them improve their service at the library desk.

Ethical use of images: Training includes information about citation styles and management tools, however staff wanted to specifically highlight the issues related to using images. Students watch a video that introduces creative commons and reviews other resources about attribution best practices, then they must explore online resources like Flickr, locate images with appropriate licenses, and post the image and attribution to a private LibGuide. Feedback shows that, for most students, these are completely new concepts that are transferable to their academic work and professional careers.

Continual Development through Projects

Michael states that "training is not a one-time occurrence, but an ongoing program of measurement and feedback that organically links training and assessment of the student staff contributions to the library" (2013, p. 6). Even though Butler University's student worker training is fairly comprehensive, staff wanted students to continue to practice and develop their skills. Therefore, once an IC student employee has completed their library trainings, they move onto a project phase. Projects arise from librarian suggestions or data assessments of patron need. Examples of library projects from the past year are below:

- Assist with the updating of our FAQ (LibAnswers)
- Create a LibGuide about the Winter Olympics
- Make the e-Book LibGuide more user-friendly
- Create a promotional poster about the library for new student orientation

- Update the Plagiarism LibGuide and assist with related classroom instruction

A free tool called Trello is used to manage all project work, both for the library and CAT sides of the program. IC student supervisors assign projects, often based on personal aptitudes or expressed interest. This allows students to make connections between their academic and career interests and their work within the program. Alternatively, projects sometimes allow students to branch out and challenge themselves in completely new ways. Some projects are solitary, but most allow students to work in close collaboration with other students or professional staff. Many projects allow for the synthesis of multiple skills learned through training. The Olympic LibGuide project is a good illustration; the student had to utilize research, technology, design, and citation skills to be successful. Additionally, project work fosters the development of crucial soft skills such as time management, teamwork, customer service, communication, and creativity. Project work allows students feel that they are making meaningful contributions to the work of the library.

Assessment is another aspect of continual development. Student supervisors give feedback and support to their peers on a daily/weekly basis. A mid-semester quiz is issued as a way to monitor student progress. In the fall, a more formal assessment process for student performance by applying a customized rubric will be implemented. The libraries also plan to distribute the LibQual survey and plan to use data to show satisfaction with services in addition to the numerical statistics tracked. This combined information helps to continually assess not just student performance, but the effectiveness of trainings.

Conclusion

Student employees are an amazing resource for modern libraries, and the list of duties assigned to them is continually expanded. However, too often responsibilities and expectations are increased without providing adequate training and professional development opportunities. As Michael writes, it is “an investment of time and effort” but it clearly “leads to greater library success” (2013).

Butler University Libraries have found success with their Information Commons model and the recent revamp of training within this program. The program was established with core values that align to those of the institution and the libraries. The program is forward-looking in that it envisions employment as a professional development opportunity and encourages students to make meaningful connections between their work, their academics, and their future careers.

In addition to these values, student employees are responsible for essential service tasks in both locations of the program. In order to help students meet these high service expectations, library trainings were revamped in the fall of 2013.

The revamp process was challenging, with extensive training that engaged students, received positive feedback, and adequately prepared students to meet service expectations. Students are more satisfied with their work, patrons are receiving better service, and supervisors are getting more out of the student workforce.

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