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Soloing with Friends



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Thursday night is my favorite time of the week. The library is quiet with students studying, all the library workers are gone, and I have time to reflect on all the different projects that need to be finished. Being a solo librarian has its advantages and disadvantages; but for many of us the biggest challenge is lack of adequate library staffing. I have wonderful student work-study assistants who seem to graduate just when I get them trained to do more than checkout books and vacuum. Therefore the question arises, how does a single professional librarian train and keep solid help when there is no budget for more paid staff? The answer for this librarian is volunteers. Our volunteers have been at the library from 1 to 40 years, and do everything from cover books to data entry for the computerized checkout system. They are senior citizens, young mothers, women who have raised their families and have extra time, and students who enjoyed their work-study so much they keep coming back to help. Last year alone the volunteer staff contributed over 1,600 hours to the library. This allowed the library to be open longer hours and quickly process new materials.

Having such a blended work crew has taught the staff several lessons in making volunteers successful. First, interview a perspective volunteer as carefully as a potential paid staff member. Will they fit in with the rest of the workforce? What are their limitations physically? What unique skills do they have which would work well with special projects? What is their past work experience and volunteer skill sets? Finally, why do they want to work in the library?

People apply to volunteer for many reasons. They like the social atmosphere of a busy college research center and enjoy the repetitive process of many library tasks (it makes them feel successful, especially if they have been out of the working world for several years), they want to learn computer skills, and of course, they love to read. Knowing why someone wishes to volunteer in the library, along with their skill sets; aides in both task placement and scheduling. It takes almost 60 hours of training to create competent volunteers for the library and when someone doesn't work out, staff time is wasted. It is perfectly acceptable to turndown someone who will not fit in socially with the current staffing or is looking for a short term training

opportunity so they can seek a job somewhere else. The ultimate goal is to do what is best for the library and the students it serves. All volunteers are given a probationary period to make sure that if there is a parting of ways, there are no hard feelings.

When a volunteer has been accepted, they are integrated into the other workers (student assistants, senior work program participants, etc.) as an equal. At our library everyone is considered library staff to avoid confusion for the patrons. We serve a large public population as well as ministry leaders in a five state area, plus our student populations on and off campus. In a situation where there is only one MLIS or MLS librarian this makes the chain of command very simple, the librarian makes the decisions after getting input from the staff. Often volunteers come up with short-cuts to processing books, notice things which need repair, and are extraordinary time savers when dealing with the public. When our volunteers work the circulation desk they are more than willing to take time to chat with the patrons for a few minutes; thus providing wonderful public relations while freeing up the librarian to do other things.

Our library keeps a strict record of everyone who volunteers, no matter how short or long the time may be. Volunteer hours may often count in grants as in-kind giving. Accurate record keeping is imperative on other fronts as well. An official record gives the volunteers a sense of their inherent value and creates an atmosphere of professionalism. It is imperative to keep accurate records of the time worked and who worked it. This also helps create an atmosphere of professionalism as the volunteers must keep time sheets, just as the other staff members do. They are expected to call in if they cannot work a scheduled shift and may be more reliable than other forms of staffing. When paid positions become available, the librarian has the option to offer jobs to a readily available source of applicants who already know the job and staff. In all fairness, many of the volunteers at our library have no desire to give up their volunteer status or the freedom it brings. In Montana, the weather is the biggest factor for everyone in getting to work on time or not at all.

I have found that our volunteers train quickly if they understand the different areas and tasks at the library through small areas of systematic exposure. Everyone is required to complete a set of tasks for book processing which starts at the arrival of the items and finish with the books being put on the shelf. Circulation desk training begins with volunteers working along side experienced workers until they thoroughly understand how items are checked in and out. Their training is exactly the same as the rest of the staff which avoids conflicting messages and mistakes. This develops a culture of inclusiveness and a level playing field for everyone. Our one air tight rule is “no one moves to a new duty until they have mastered the ones before.”

A self-directed workforce requires only supportive supervision and thus become a real asset to the institution. For the solo librarian whose help may consist of work-study students which rotate out at the end of each year, volunteers supply a more stable workforce and may be trained to do more complicated tasks as time goes on.

For our situation, volunteers add a multi-layered addition to the staff dynamics, work productivity, and public interaction. They ease the workload on everyone else and are willing to do menial tasks without complaint. They are a great source of positive publicity for the school and engage the community in campus life. The fact that they are willing to faithfully show up to do the same work others are paid for without compensation is an excellent example to both students and faculty alike.

As for tonight, I have to make a list of projects for tomorrow. My volunteers will be entering books on the computer, typing information into logs and covering books. I am so thankful they are here to help. †

Are you a solo librarian? Do you have thoughts or ideas that you use that might assist other librarians? Please consider sharing your ideas with others in ACL by submitting to this column. Contact Associate Editor, Jeannie Ferriss (jferiss@yellowstonechristian.edu) for information.