Small Library, Big Job

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Small Library, Big Job:
Seven Suggestions for Success in the Single-Professional Setting

Many small college libraries employ only one professional. That means one person serves as reference librarian, cataloger, acquisitions specialist, circulation supervisor, inter-library loan officer, periodicals manager, information literacy instructor, and administrator - as well as committee member and sometimes teacher. (We won't mention organist, student activity sponsor, or even volleyball coach.) Wearing so many hats at one time can be both a bane and a blessing.

"No two days are ever alike."
"I like being my own boss."
"It's never boring."

A 2004 ACL Conference roundtable discussion brought out all of these positives about working in the single-professional library. But the twenty or so librarians who attended were also quick to mention long hours, stress, and backlogs of work that burden them in their assigned places of service. They shared some very helpful words of advice for those who work in similar situations:

1. You are not alone.
Delegate whenever possible. Recruit and train others to do your job. Instruct students so that they improve research strategies and library use - maybe even self-serve circulation. Match the strengths and gifts of your staff and student workers to their assigned tasks and allow them creativity. Hold your support staff accountable for their work so that you maximize the importance of their jobs. Give positive reinforcement for jobs well done. Have a staff prayer time and build communication with each other.

2. Be productive.
View your day in 15-minute increments so small tasks or pieces of big tasks can be completed. Use planning helps like a Day-Timer or PDA or other calendar for keeping you on task. Know your limitations and plan your day to effectively use your "body clock" and library quiet times. Take breaks to make you more effective in your work. Get a cordless phone for you and/or your circulation staff to release you from the desk. Motivate yourself with prayer, guilt, self-discipline, or a reward - whatever works!

3. Set real priorities.
The job will never be done so don't be too task-oriented. Keep your focus on people and the goals of your library. Don't let interruptions stress you. Don't neglect your own spiritual life. Have the courage to say no.

4. Connect with other librarians.
Emphasize networking with others. Involve yourself in local consortia. Take advantage of group learning opportunities. Continue your education - formally and informally.

5. Be generous with praise.
Use positive reinforcement for a job well done. Try "secret book worms" or other affirmation to encourage your student clerks. Celebrate often. Find positives to include in every report and every evaluation. Your affirmation of others will come back to you.

6. Write it down!
Develop policy and procedure manuals for your student workers, your staff and even yourself! Outline tasks and the steps to accomplish them. Include rationale for decisions (especially in the director's manual). Also, prepare information notebooks with passwords, phone numbers, emergency procedures, and other important information for your staff. You may even prepare daily task sheets for your student clerks, or assign them small book carts that include their daily tasks. Enforce a "leave notes" policy so that everyone knows what is going on.

7. Enjoy your job.
Laugh often. Choose your attitude so that your service is unto the Lord. If you are the only professional in your library, your outlook will set the tone for all that happens there. Remember, there are no little jobs in Kingdom work. Take joy in serving your students, your institution, and your Lord in the place He has given you. ♦

This article is a summary of a workshop given at ACL Conference 2004
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