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Creative Strategies for Effective and Engaging Student Employee Training: Helping Student Employees Engage, Grow, and "Be Known"

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ABSTRACT

Is your library known as "the" place for students to work on your campus? Do your student employees get excited about "famous" annual training events in your department? Do your former student employees return years later to say hello because the library felt like their second home during college? Student employees are full of potential to become actively engaged participants in library operations and delivery of quality service. However, many librarians and library staff members struggle to motivate their student employees and help them see their employment as a highly valuable, formative work experience. The authors share some creative (and tested) ideas to improve and assess the student employee training experience. Ideas shared include annual training events held at the George Fox University Library like the Amazing Race, Turkey Bowl Team Competition, and more!

Introduction

George Fox University, a nationally recognized Christian university, promises that each student will "be known" personally, academically, and spiritually. At the George Fox Libraries, we take this mission to heart, serving our students by building relationships with them, supporting their academic success, and encouraging them by pointing them closer to Jesus. One of the things we love most about our work and the culture at George Fox is the priority placed on taking an opportunity to connect with students. Through relationships cultivated at the circulation and research help desks, we can connect students to resources and services that meet their needs. When we interact with students through our online chat service or social media sites, we strive to provide positive interactions that build engagement with the library and encourage our students. Beyond these library-wide efforts to help our students "be known," the public services department strives to connect

with our student employees and engage them personally, academically, and spiritually. We believe that those relationships are vital to training and empowering a strong, service-oriented student staff.

It is a blessing to work at a Christian university where we have the privilege of discipling our students through the venue of work. Through our participation in the "be known" promise, we also have the opportunity to contribute to student retention by providing a caring work environment where our students feel known. Being intentional with students takes a lot of time and energy, but it is well worth the payoff. Students who feel cared for are more likely to stay in the same job which creates longtime employees who can help patrons more efficiently. At George Fox Libraries, we strategically use an effective and engaging student training program that involves connecting with students, empowering them to do their work, welcoming feedback and new ideas, and having fun.

Connect

Implementing a relationship-focused department requires some key cultural shifts. Library supervisory staff should consider how they might redefine productivity and evaluate the student culture in existence to determine what methods and strategies will work for student training. For example, within our department at George Fox we are supported by the university-wide mission to focus on our students and their individual needs. This student-first attitude starts at the top. Department managers can cultivate a positive student-focused environment by encouraging and empowering their supervisory staff to make time for the student staff members that work for them. Sometimes productivity will look different because supervising and interacting with students takes time and often becomes a significant part of the job. Because of this, it is extremely important to hire well, picking applicants that demonstrate skill or potential to deliver excellent customer service. Interview questions can be developed that provide candidates the opportunity to talk about relatable skills they have that would lend themselves to the student worker experience. For example, asking them about a project they have accomplished that they are proud of might indicate their ability to follow through, the kind of work they enjoy doing, etc.

The second cultural shift relates to the current student culture on campus. Due to George Fox University's "Be Known" promise and emphasis on connectedness, our students often expect campus activities, including their work, to be relational. Our current student staff is made up of undergraduates who value authenticity and meaningful connections (Tulgan, 2016, p. 63). As Bruce Tulgan (2016) in *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage the Millennials* states:

> Your Millennial employees need to know that you know who they are and care about their success. You need to make it a priority to spend time with them. Guide them through this very difficult and scary world. Break things down for them

like a teacher. Provide regular, gentle course corrections to keep them on track. Be honest with them so you can help them improve. Keep close track of their successes no matter how small. Reward the behavior you want and need to see, and even negotiate special rewards for above-and-beyond performance in very small increments along the way. (p. 59)

We try to be "real" with our employees by being vulnerable (in appropriate ways) as their supervisors, letting them get to know us and sharing examples from our own lives when appropriate in conversations. We also focus on developing and implementing trainings that "speak their language." We lay the groundwork for conversations by having student employees check in and say goodbye at the beginning and end of all their shifts. We also promote interaction by leaving our office doors open so that we are available for the students and occasionally sending texts of encouragement or scripture to them. We have a candy jar for the student employees that they can enjoy either during their shifts or can stop by and enjoy when in the library. Sometimes when the students are having a bad day they will come by for candy or any baked treats we have brought in for the day, and it gives us a chance to see them and encourage them. All of these things facilitate connections.

Figure 1. *Students and staff add their pictures to the "Would You Rather" board to vote on their choice. May 2, 2018.*

In addition to encouraging conversations with supervisors, we encourage students to interact with and encourage each other. We promote this interaction by putting fun things in the work environment to spark conversation. For example (see Figure 1), we have a "Would you Rather" Board that is decorated with a theme for the year and each week a new question is posted giving two options. Students and staff all have their own themed Would You Rather piece with their picture on it that they

can place on one side or the other of the board depending on which thing they would rather do. Last year we had an underwater theme (pieces were fish, crabs, jelly fish) and this year is going to be a bakery window theme (pieces are donuts, cupcakes, eclairs). This is a great way to promote fun interaction and discussion between the student workers and also with the staff. Students also engage in their own activities, leaving inspirational quotes or messages on the circulation desk for their coworkers, etc. Last year, we gave them the opportunity to post their favorite verse on a bulletin board for others to read. We find that through the relationships cultivated, we build solid, confident, loyal and motivated student workers.

Empower

While building relationships is foundational to who we are and what we do, we also get library work done! Throughout the year, we host a variety of training events oriented around encouraging teamwork, having fun, and learning the skills needed for the job. Empowering students to do their work means teaching them how to do their jobs and then releasing them to do their work. We emphasize their personal responsibility to complete tasks efficiently and accurately – we never want to "babysit" them. To adequately train our student workers, we host a variety of training events throughout the year and supplement this training with documentation for them to refer to as needed.

Successful training events involve several key elements which, with a little planning, are simple to incorporate. When developing a training for students, start with the purpose, what do you want to accomplish? Clear learning objectives provide a structure for activities you design. At George Fox, we always try to keep training fun with reward-based competition. We often offer up simple rewards like candy, coffee gift cards, small medals, certificates, etc. to the winners. When students know what is at stake a few weeks in advance, the spirit of competition can become really heightened by the time the training day rolls around. In a library, you can make almost anything a game. For example, if you want to have students work on their reshelving skills, develop a small team competition to reshelve books correctly, marking the books with flags and tracking each teams' successes. Finally, an effective training attempts to meet multiple learning styles. Student employees are diverse, so it is important to make sure your teaching is not one-dimensional but includes active learning opportunities. Create activities that are hands-on, require movement, involve some reading or discussion, and so on, and combine these with more traditional models of training such as checklists and classroom trainings. At George Fox, we use a variety of trainings throughout the year.

First, we host an annual fall kickoff training event on the Sunday afternoon before school starts each year. There are two main purposes for this event: to orient student workers to the basic functions in their jobs and our expectations; and to allow students

to interact with each other and staff to build camaraderie. New students have an opportunity to complete their new-hire paperwork and familiarize themselves with the library layout. We intentionally keep the initial training fun and basic, covering the most important aspects of the job. For example, we provide them with a tour of the building, go over clocking in and getting a substitute, and then review a few basic circulation functions like checking items in and out and selling print cards. We act out security gate and common front desk scenarios. To make things fun and interactive, we have tried two different activities to review our expectations: Rules Pictionary and Rules Family Feud. These games provide us with the opportunity to make our expectations clear while also having students build camaraderie by competing in teams. More in-depth training items are placed on a checklist to go over with each student individually during their first work shifts. We prioritize getting each student individually trained by a supervisor during their first few weeks on the job.

Every student who works in the circulation area has a checklist to go through with a supervisor, whether it is their first or last year. While each item will be covered more in depth with new students, they are reviewed with returning students as well. When surveyed, our students consistently rank this one-on-one training time with a supervisor highest for effectiveness in learning job functions. The time working through the training checklist with each student is valuable for relationship building and allows us to cover the material at a speed and method appropriate to each student.

In November, to reinforce everything learned during the fall semester, we host a Turkey Bowl competition. The circulation students are divided into two teams and earn points for their team by correctly answering job-related questions during their shifts. A timer on the supervisor's computer monitor is set for two minutes and then the question is read. During the first minute, the student can use any outside resources but cannot ask any other students for help and the answer is worth two points. During the second minute the student can ask any other people (other than the supervisor asking the question) for help and the question is worth one point. We ask each student six questions total (usually two per shift) over the course of three days. We keep a running total on a large scoreboard posted in the circulation area and the team with the most points wins. In addition to bragging rights, we have generally awarded the winning team with prizes like candy bars and coffee gift cards.

Our flagship student training event is the Amazing Race which takes place every February. We typically have our race on a Friday evening since our library closes at 5:00 on Fridays and this event relies on the students who are training having free use of the library. We have a DJ and music going throughout the event. We divide our students into teams of five. Each person is tied to the team shelving cart with a string and they race through the library to accomplish assigned circulation tasks i.e.,

shelving, pulling paged items, inventory, processing the courier bin items, checking books in and out, etc. As seen in Figure 2, supervisors are watching each activity and sign off on the task card when the task is completed correctly. The team with the fastest time wins. Times can be impacted by penalties incurred for not following the rules or completing tasks incorrectly (we usually have our reference librarians come to the event to serve as referees). We have prizes (usually coffee gift cards) for the winning team and celebrate the evening with ice cream sundaes. The students look forward to this event. We draw for teams early so that the competitive talk between teams can get started.

Figure 2. *A supervisor evaluates an Amazing Race team's tasks and tabulates final team scores. March 13, 2015.*

In order to provide a quick reference for processes and procedures throughout the year, we have circulation and interlibrary wikis that index brief descriptions of all processes and procedures. Circulation students can access the wiki from the front desk computers. The wiki allows them to search a specific topic while helping patrons obtain needed information (e.g. alumni privileges, checkout procedures, course reserves, visiting patron procedures, opening and closing procedures, etc.). The wiki also includes a "What's New for Today?" section where we post daily news updates. Often this will include instructions or reminders about procedures that are not being followed correctly, updates on events, and other miscellaneous information. To encourage the students, we post a scripture verse of the day as well. Every student is required to read the "What's New for Today?" portion of the Wiki at the beginning of their shift.

Welcome Feedback

While we do not encourage students to innovate when it comes to following processes we have already strategically developed for them, we do encourage them to (after resources such as the wiki have been consulted) ask us anything. We would rather be asked clarifying questions than backtrack on a process gone wrong. We also encourage them to give us feedback if they do not understand why we do something, rather than just make up their own process. We are happy to explain why a certain process exists, and that reflection provides us with the opportunity to think about whether it is still the most logical, efficient way to do something. Since students are doing the daily work, they often have ideas about ways to streamline that can be very helpful! For example, we recently opened a new 24/7 space in the library, which required adjusting our closing procedures. During the transition, we emphasized that we were working things out with the new process and wanted feedback on how it was going. Our student workers who close the library regularly shared their thoughts on how the process was going (or, in this case, was not going) and made some excellent suggestions for how the procedures could be adjusted. Because we approached the situation with a posture of humility, we learned together how to make the closing process smoother for everyone involved. Humility is essential to being approachable and receiving feedback.

To invite further reflection and feedback, we conduct an annual student training survey at the end of the year. The feedback we get is always helpful for our supervisory team, as we evaluate what went well and what can be refined. We are in a constant quest to improve our training events to be more effective. A former student employee once referred to the library as "the Google™" of work study jobs," and we want to keep our reputation! For the past several years, we have been inundated with applications, which allows us to continue to recruit top notch employees.

Have Fun

Connecting, empowering, and welcoming feedback are essential to effectively engaging and training student employees. In all of our interactions, we also emphasize fun. We love our jobs, and as supervisors, we lead students by example, demonstrating the balance of having a good time and getting work done.

During the year, in order to show our appreciation for our students, we host two special, exclusively fun events. The first is Pie Day, which occurs right before Thanksgiving. As shown in Figure 3, the entire library staff brings one or two pies each and we line an entire large counter with pie for the students to enjoy. The second is our annual Student Appreciation Party where we book a multipurpose room in the library for three hours on the Monday (Dead Day) of the spring semester finals week. We provide pizza, pop and ice cream for the students and also provide a space to hang out and play games together. At that event we also have graduation cards for our graduating library employees that everyone can sign.

Figure 3. *Supervisors bring a variety of pies to share with the students on Pie Day. November 21, 2016.*

From the beginning of our employees' time with us as freshmen to their graduation, we take our mission to heart in how we create space for connecting with them, encourage their academic endeavors, and look for opportunities to pour spiritual encouragement into their lives. This "be known" ethos is a George Fox University distinctive that extends beyond our interactions with student employees to everyone we encounter through the library, be it in person or online interactions. This intentionality takes time and effort, but prioritizing the wholistic care of our student employees on an individual level is worth it. As we welcome their feedback and cultivate a fun yet focused work environment, we invite them into the process of fostering a positive work environment with a strong sense of camaraderie among student employees and staff. This ultimately produces longtime employees who know and implement our policies and procedures thoroughly and confidently, while extending the "be known" promise to others that they encounter. ✚

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