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# Evaluating student assistants as library employees

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*How one library appraises student workers.*

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**E**valuating library staff can be a time-consuming and frustrating process. Depending on the type of position, the job description's inherent latitude, and the employee's expertise and motivation, it can be difficult for the evaluating party to determine, with any real precision, the degree to which individuals are adequately fulfilling job requirements. In the case of library student assistant employees, the problems associated with evaluation are compounded; although student assistant job descriptions are usually clear and concise (even restrictive), the circumstances and pressures under which these individuals work are quite different from those of other library employees.

The foundation of any evaluative process is the attitude of the individual doing the appraising. When evaluating regular staff, many aspects may be taken for granted; however, with student employees, there are a few pivotal points which need to be closely considered. First, the evaluator should remember that the document used for formal, written student evaluations is simply a reference tool, and not an end product in itself. Evaluation for this class of employee is an ongoing, daily process, and not something which is only done at the conclusion of library employment.

Second, one should always take into consideration that the student assistant is just that, a student, in the academic setting to learn, grow and develop,

and that students have substantial commitments in addition to their library work.

And third, student assistants are temporary, but not inferior, employees. If the evaluating staff perceives student workers as an expendable commodity, whose worth can be measured solely in terms of how much labor can be acquired for nominal costs in both time and money, then student employees simply function as cogs in the great library machine, and one's formal evaluation may consist of an elementary mathematical formula designed to rank performance on an absolute and immutable scale. Although this enormously simplifies the evaluation process, it leaves much to be desired in terms of providing for a positive work environment or for giving student employees valuable feedback on their work.

In the Meriam Library at California State University, Chico, we formally evaluate each of our student assistants at least twice a year, usually at the end of each semester. These evaluations are completely confidential, and workers are permitted to examine and review with their unit supervisors any and all aspects of their performance as indicated on the form. Our forms divide the criteria for our student assistant evaluations into four broad categories: operational, personal, interpersonal and leadership. Each of these categories has several specific items which we assess independently. Soon

after our students are hired, they are given one of our evaluation forms to examine, and are encouraged to ask questions if they need clarification on any point or are uncertain about any item's parameters. In this way, all student workers know from the first day of employment what is expected of them, and what will be the criteria for their formal, written evaluation.

Operational aspects deal with how well student assistants grasp the policies and procedures of their unit, and put them into daily practice. Of our four categories, this is probably the easiest to evaluate, because there is empirical evidence that can be assessed using standard or comparative data. Here the key points we emphasize are: grasp of the department's routines, the ability to carry out verbal and/or written instructions, and the accuracy, thoroughness, and neatness of work produced. Because many of our student employees must carry out their jobs away from the close scrutiny of a staff supervisor, we also include in this category the ability to work without immediate supervision.

Often we have found that this single category of evaluation tends to monopolize the process if the evaluator is not circumspect, and we guard against this by restricting its importance on the evaluation form itself. First, it occupies a little less than a third of the space on the document, thereby insuring (or at least giving the visual impression) that each of the other categories carry a weight equal to that of the operational. And second, it appears as the third listing of major categories, giving the evaluator an indication that it is not of primary importance. While it is probably easier for the evaluator to focus on day-to-day operational performance, a system with this emphasis does not take into consideration the continued development of an employee once that employee has learned the routines of the unit so well that they are automatic. One of the principles of our evaluation process is that we, as supervisors in the academic setting, can do more to prepare students for the real world of employment than simply teach them a limited set of library skills.

In the personal category, we have found it helpful to remember that most students employed by the academic library come to their jobs as unskilled labor, and generally have little or no knowledge of library operations or procedures, except for that which they may have managed to incidentally acquire as patrons using the facility. In fact for many, their jobs with the library may be their very first employment experience. This means that not only are the supervisors of new student assistants going to need to train and evaluate student employees in the daily routine of the unit's operation, but it will be necessary for supervisors to encourage in these young adults personal habits appropriate to the work environment.

The obvious personal commodity which a new

or continuing student employee must have or acquire is a sense of appearance appropriate to the workplace. With today's fashion trends, debate about whether this or that specific article of clothing is acceptable wear will rapidly become a point of ongoing contention, especially when modern fashions are more fleeting than the morning dew. We find that it proves quite effective to simply remind each student worker at the beginning of employment that the library is a public place where common decency prevails. Clothes must not be ragged, dirty or holed. If shorts are worn, they must be hemmed and provide adequate coverage. And personal hygiene is to be maintained, especially in public service units where an individual's presentation reflects on the professional image of the library.

A far more important part of learning good personal work habits, which we especially emphasize, is the development of personal time management. Student assistants are students first and foremost. Course loads can be substantial, demanding an enormous amount of effort and requiring meticulous scheduling of each day's activities. If students are made aware that employment in the library necessitates the same sense of responsibility which they bring to their college coursework, and that a balance between class, study, and work is expected, many problems concerning time management, particularly attendance, may be avoided. Understanding this, it becomes necessary for the supervisor of student assistants to walk a fine line between insisting upon a strict work schedule and permitting enough flexibility to accommodate the students' needs in relation to their academic goals. And there must be a clear and uniform provision for occasional changes in schedule, consistently and equitably applied. Study groups often meet with short notice and at inconvenient times. Field trips may have to be rescheduled because of inclement weather, seasonal variations, illness, etc. These anomalies in one's schedule must not be held against the student worker, who, after all, is in college in the first place to receive an academic degree, not to work in the university library.

The interpersonal aspects of evaluation involve assessing the student assistant's ability to interact with fellow employees, and with the public, in a reasonable, mature fashion. Tact, manners, and the capacity to listen are all paramount when dealing with the public. This is especially important when student workers are confronted with patrons who adamantly believe they have been wronged in some way by the library or the system, and express their displeasure in no uncertain terms. Responding to such situations is never easy, even for those of us who must do so every day, but it is important for staff to allow student assistants to handle problem patrons on their own as much as possible, while

being ready to quickly intercede if the situation gets out of hand. Later, after the situation has been rectified, it has proven quite beneficial to review the entire incident with the students involved, making suggestions and allowing the students to express concerns about their performance.

When interacting with others on the staff, important qualities are cooperativeness and the ability to accept constructive criticism. For some student workers, these are qualities which do not come easily. Occasionally, these young adults misconstrue a supervisor's efforts to improve their performance as being a veiled or oblique attack on their individual worth. Patience on the supervisor's part is necessary in these situations. After corrective direction, we have found it helpful for the supervisor to end the conversation on a positive note, striving to recognize the individual's contribution to the effort of the entire unit. This not only serves to correct the problem, but cultivates in student workers a sense that all criticism is not necessarily an indication that they have utterly failed at a task, but that an aspect of their work could stand improvement, while their overall efforts are appreciated.

In the Meriam Library, we have a Student Supervisor program which promotes individuals who have shown a marked ability to lead and assume responsibility. For these student assistants, a special set of criteria are utilized which evaluate their abilities in special areas.

As supervisors themselves, it is essential that these workers are self-motivating and capable of working without themselves being closely supervised. This means that their commitment to the job must approximate that of regular library staff. Initiative, follow-through, interpersonal skills which are more refined than those of other student assistants, maturity, and the ability to function calmly and with reason in pressure situations, are all necessary components. Their verbal and communication skills must be strong, especially since in our library, these are the people who often train our other student assistants in the operational functions of the various departments. They must also have a sense of fairness, and put it into daily practice, insuring that the personnel in their charge are treated equally when it comes to training, job assignments, schedule changes, and so on.

Finally, the evaluator must take into consideration that student workers can only be as good as their training. Training techniques and manuals should be reviewed or rewritten at least annually, especially in academic libraries where changing priorities and the influx of new technologies have become the norm rather than the exception. It is our responsibility to make sure that every effort is made by us to allow our student employees their best chance at doing their best for us. It is their performance on the job, good or bad, which serves as our evaluation as their supervisors and mentors.



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## New College & Research Libraries editor

Gloriana St. Clair has been named editor of *College & Research Libraries* for a three-year term beginning at the close of the 1990 ALA Annual Conference. St. Clair, assistant director for technical, automation, and administrative services at Oregon State University's William Jasper Kerr Library since 1987, will serve as an editorial apprentice from January through June 1990 under Charles Martell, current *C&RL* editor and library director at California State University, Sacramento.



*Gloriana St. Clair*

St. Clair was selected from a strong pool of applicants in a search process that attempted to identify as many qualified candi-

dates as possible from among the academic library community. In addition to position announcements in *C&RL News*, applications and nominations were solicited by members of the ACRL Publications Committee and the ACRL leadership during the eleven-month search.

St. Clair brings to the *C&RL* editorship a strong background in librarianship, English composition, and technical writing. She completed undergraduate study in English at the University of Oklahoma and holds an MLS from the University of California at Berkeley, a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Oklahoma, and an MBA from the University of Texas at San Antonio. During her academic career, St. Clair has held various professional librarian and faculty positions at Texas A&M University, the University of Oklahoma, the University of California at Berkeley, the College of Charleston, Western Carolina University, Walsh College, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and the San Antonio Public Library.

A member of both the *ACRL Publications in Librarianship* Editorial Board and the LAMA LA&M Editorial Board, St. Clair's professional activities include committee service in ALA's LITA and ALCTS divisions and the Library Research Round Table. Her major editorial responsibilities have included the *Texas Library Journal*, the *Georgia-South Carolina College English Association Newsletter*, and the *Working Papers of the College*

of Business Administration at the University of Texas at San Antonio. A prolific writer, her work has appeared in *College & Research Libraries*, *Technicalities*, *Wilson Library Bulletin*, and *Journal of Library Administration*. She has recently completed, along with Rose Mary Magrill, a study of undergraduate use of library collections funded by a grant from the Council on Library Resources (see pp. 25-28, this issue). ■ ■

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## Bibliographic instruction and accreditation in higher education

By Marilyn Lutzker

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*A new combination—accrediting libraries on the basis of how well people are taught to use them.*

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**S**ignificant changes are being made in the manner in which libraries are viewed during the all-important higher education accreditation process. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education now expects that each accredited institution have a bibliographic instruction program, and that a library's effectiveness within the teaching/learning environment of the institution be clearly demonstrated.

*Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Standards for Accreditation* states:

"The centrality of a library/learning resources center in the educational mission of an institution deserves more than rhetoric and must be supported by more than lip service. An active and continuous program of bibliographic instruction is essential to realize this goal" (p. 35).

Howard Simmons, executive director of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, could not be more forthright in his support of bibliographic instruction. He has written, "As part of the accreditation process it is essential that all...institutions develop a strong program of bibliographic instruction as one means of improving *academic quality*" [emphasis added] (*Bibliographic Instruction*, p.11).

In support of this new emphasis, in September 1989, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education held a workshop to discuss methods of evaluating BI programs within the accreditation process. This article is based on the presentation made by the author at that workshop and on the discussions of the workshop participants.

I have three objectives for sharing these ideas