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# Make the most of your student assistants

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*Orientations, evaluations, and recognition are keys to productive employees.*

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Like most academic institutions, the Blagg-Huey Library at Texas Woman's University is greatly dependent on student assistants to perform many library tasks. With a campus population of over 10,000 (including faculty and staff), the library has holdings of 755,000 volumes, and regularly hires approximately sixty 15-hour student assistants. There had gradually been a noticeable decrease in student assistant morale and subsequent performance. There was lack of continuity among departments regarding working, training, dress code, and other policies for the students. Naturally, these differences were being compared among the students, and a sense of resentment was stirring. It was also believed that students generally did not perceive their on-campus part-time jobs as "real" employment. A committee of three librarians who regularly supervise students was named to set up standards. We began meeting in the spring of 1989 and by the next summer session had prepared a training manual and orientation meeting ready. Though both have since been through several revisions, we now feel we have achieved an objective, workable, and fair means of establishing consistency within the various library departments.

## Handbook

Our first task was to compile the *Student Assistant Handbook*. In it we outlined the following: work permits and schedules, time cards, general on-duty responsibilities, rest breaks, safety, dress code, evaluations, grievance procedures, continued-employment procedures, and grounds for possible dismissal. The manual is loose-leaf and copies were

given to each department. We kept it brief, with clear headings and short, informational paragraphs. All information is applicable for all students, regardless of the department. When specifics were needed, a statement might read: "Turn in your time cards to your supervisor according to department guidelines."

Included in each manual is a one-page brief description of the types of jobs students perform in each department. Next is a section showing examples of checklists, evaluations, job application

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forms, reprimand forms, time cards, and Student Assistant of the Year nomination forms.

The last section is reserved for special instructions to be inserted by each department's supervisor of students. These include department-specific information. An example might be the working schedules for that department. There are also instructions for various tasks performed by students in that area. A checklist is signed by both the student and the supervisor within the first two weeks of employment. Each task has two blanks beside it so the assistant and supervisor can initial beside each individual task when both feel comfortable with the

knowledge gained and performed. These checklists are explicitly detailed to ensure to assistant and supervisor that all expectations are being met.

### Orientation

After compiling the *Handbook*, we determined that a general orientation was needed for all students beginning employment in the library. Each session lasts approximately one hour and several are scheduled at the beginning of each semester. All students are required to attend and include the hour on their time cards. All staff who supervise student assistants are encouraged to attend a session. The orientations are conducted by the committee, with the library director present to welcome and encourage the students. In the interest of saving paper and money, students are not given a copy of the *Handbook* each, but are given a checklist for the orientation meeting. They initial each area covered as it is explained, and, most importantly, as they feel they understand it.

The meetings are kept as informal as possible with much stress on how important the student assistants are to the efficient workflow of the library, as well as how important their jobs are to them in beginning to establish good job histories. Before leaving, students are asked to anonymously fill out a brief evaluation form for the orientation session itself. Additionally, they are required to sign up for a general library tour (conducted by the reference staff)—again, this hour is included on their time cards—and they are asked to read the *Student Assistant Handbook* shortly after reporting for their first workday.

### Evaluations

At this point, the committee decided that a complete revision of the student evaluation form was necessary. We searched the literature and finally adapted composites of several examples, and added information pertinent to our library.<sup>1</sup> The brief form requires students to perform self-evaluations. Space for students' written comments is provided. Supervisors then perform their assessments. The evaluation form includes a possible "rehire conditionally" status (if both agree that some job improvement is needed). Completing evaluations at both midterm and end-of-semester helps supervisor and assistant stay aware of work performance. A private meeting between supervisor and assistant is held and open communication is encouraged. Emphasis is put on identifying problem areas and helping the student. The supervisor should remain open to suggestions from the assistant as to how the supervisor might better help with the working environment.

### Student Assistant of the Year

Finally, we decided to institute the Student Assistant of the Year Award as a special encouragement and display of appreciation. A brief form was made listing the criteria necessary to be nominated; these stress performance and particularly outstanding effort by a student. All supervisors and students were provided with forms. Nominations could be anonymous and were placed in a ballot-type box. Students could nominate themselves or each other with final selection being made by the committee. At the end of the school year an informal reception was held where presentations were made. All nominees were presented with a certificate of excellence, and the Student Assistant of the Year was given a framed certificate in addition to having his or her name added to a perpetual plaque placed in the library lobby.

### Conclusion

Preparation and implementation of the student assistant program required a substantial amount of effort and the library benefitted considerably. Students now have a better understanding of our expectations of them and feel less "in-the-dark" about policies. We have been better able to ascertain their needs and stronger lines of communication have been established.

For more information readers can telephone (817) 898-3768. The author wishes to thank the other members of the Committee.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Folke Bernadotte Memorial Library, Gustavus Adolphus College, "Annual Student Assistant Evaluation," in *Managing Student Workers in College Libraries*, Clip Note #7, comp. Michael D. Kathman and Jane McGurn Kathman (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1986), pp. 151–52. The committee made particular use of this document in adapting our evaluation form.

<sup>2</sup>The author wishes to thank the other members of the committee: Metta Nicewarner (coordinator for public services) and Rita Yribar (special collections librarian). ■ ■

### Correction

A phrase was inadvertently omitted from the first sentence of the November 1991 Preservation News column. The first sentence should have read: "The Amherst College Archives have received the two federal grants in support of the preservation microfilming of the Dwight W. Morrow papers." *C&RL News* regrets the error.

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