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Student Assistant Training in a Small Academic Library

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Student Assistant Training in a Small Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

At Valparaiso University's main Library, formerly Moellering Library, now the Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources, student employees are an integral part of day-to-day operations. Students work at the Reference Desk and must be able to handle reference questions. Since the fall 2000 semester, the Reference Services Librarian has been creating a training program for the student assistants, consisting of an initial training period and a series of quizzes combined with review sessions. Student assistants are also indispensable in Instruction Services. These students are charged with library website and instruction materials' updates. Methods, lessons learned throughout the process, and quiz questions are used to illustrate the development of the training program. Student performance evaluations and feedback have been positive.

KEYWORDS

Reference services, Instruction services, student assistants, training program

INTRODUCTORY FOOTNOTE

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One Saturday, early in the fall semester, the Reference Services Librarian at Valparaiso University came to the library to work on a project. As the head of the Reference Department, the Reference Services Librarian manages reference student assistants and oversees Interlibrary Loan, but also assists in other areas such as instruction and web design. Other librarians work in reference, but they do not report to the Reference Services Librarian. That afternoon, what was supposed to be a fairly short visit turned into a five hour ordeal, largely because the Reference Services Librarian ended up answering reference questions much of that time. The problem was not a lack of staffing at the Reference desk, for there were several students working that afternoon. The problem was that those students were not adequately trained to be working on their own and kept coming to the librarian for help. This lack of training was due to the newness of the reference student assistant program combined with professional turnover in that department. The barrage of questions prompted the Reference Services Librarian to wonder what was happening on other Saturdays when she did not come into work. This experience was the impetus for many changes in the Reference training program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an extensive selection of articles and web sites focusing upon student training. Several served as benchmarks for this project.

David Baldwin's book, *Effective Management of Student Employment: Organizing for Student Employment in Academic Libraries* (2000), is a fundamental resource for any library that employs student assistants. Serving as both a foundational referral tool as well as guide to good practices, this timely and well-organized book presents both the theoretical and practical aspects of student employment.

Two articles in particular helped to put the VU proposed program in context. Edwards' (1990) "Student Staff Training in the Smaller Library" recognizes many of the constraints small libraries work within (informality with staff, inconsistency with training, and procedural discontinuity between departments) while also acknowledging the positive aspects of flexibility and adaptability to student needs. While the specific need at VU is student assistant training for reference, instruction, and web work, the Lipow article (1999), " 'In Your Face' Reference Service" is important due to the changing context of reference services and clientele. The author contrasts the passive ways in which librarians traditionally begin patron interaction (often waiting for the patron to come to a service desk or office) with the new active service models that many patrons are accustomed to in the commercial world: email and chat interactions, roving staff, and online documentation. With examples and suggestions, Lipow encourages libraries to adopt real strategies to meet the needs of a changing clientele.

Many good articles, also containing pertinent literature reviews and comprehensive reference lists, reviewed various theoretical aspects of student assistant training. Borin's (2001) article offers practical tips and advice while also addressing larger theoretical training issues, such as patrons not making distinctions between librarians and student assistants working at the reference desk and the diversity (or lack thereof) of the student staff. An in-depth model of the creation of a quality training program is detailed in the Kathmans' (2000) article. This article is an essential read for any library with, or considering, a student assistant program. Its comprehensive nature (literature review, training problems, a program model, and evaluation of training) provides step-by-step for those creating a new student assistant program as well as serving those struggling with an unsatisfactory program.

While many librarians in instruction and reference consider the various learning styles of students in the classroom context, Burrows' (1995) article is a reminder to consider these differences when training student assistants. She thoughtfully considers some professional librarian issues of student assistant training needs, such as a library's possible over-dependence, due to financial constraints, on an ill-equipped workforce (poorly trained student assistants). Constantinou (1998) discusses student assistant motivation in very specific and unique ways, emphasizing that this process should be given the attention and preparation that it deserves. In this way, the student and library supervisor treat one another with professional respect, starting with the initial job interview. While applied to the media center student assistants, Beile's (1997) focus of competency-based training (CBT) does a great job of addressing the practical reality of creating a CBT program that is easily adapted to a library situation.

Specific idea and example articles are also very useful when specifically considering program creation or re-design. Based on an ongoing, successful program, Wesley (1990) recounts her library's consideration that the students' meeting with the library director is key while also encouraging the use of an independent, self-guided, active game (such as well-thought-out scavenger hunt) to serve as an orientation to the library. While every aspect of the University of Northern Iowa's Rod Library student assistant training program is worthy of consideration, author Chris Neuhaus (2001) notes the use of bi-weekly worksheets as both learning and measuring tools has proven highly effective. Even back in 1985, Guilfoyle was advocating the use of computer assisted training as a rich addition to a program. This excellent article emphasizes that not all training should be done through a computer and then discusses appropriate detail about the planning, design, and benefits such training can provide. While specifically addressing the student assistant program for Circulation duties, Henning's (2000)

article underscores the fact that an entire library needs to collaborate in the development of a rewarding training program.

A sampling of web sites offers clear examples of what can be done online and with open access to support student assistants. The Houston Cole Library at Jacksonville State University offers a visually clean, easy-to-follow web site designed specifically for its student assistants. Very direct and to-the-point information is available for the students—factual highlights that serve to enhance basic knowledge of their jobs as well as training, hiring, evaluation, and disciplinary procedures. Providing easy access to work forms rewards (and perhaps ensures) students' ongoing return to the site. The University of Louisville's University Libraries Student Assistant Training Program web site is enhanced with the inclusion of an "Information for Supervisors" section. Supervisors benefit from a common, consistent resource for student assistant training and evaluation materials. Also following a simple, clean design, the graphics used on this site illustrate many of the procedures the student assistants will learn. This learning is then reinforced with ongoing exercises and the online availability of the entire student assistant handbook. Niederlander's LibrarySupportStaff.com, a site designed to support library paraprofessionals, offers a compilation web page on library student workers. Both print and online resources are recommended, with many links to other student assistant training tools produced by various libraries.

BACKGROUND

Set in northwest Indiana, Valparaiso University (VU) is home to 3600 students, with majors in over 60 fields of study in five colleges (arts & sciences, honors, nursing, engineering, and

business). The University also supports a law school with its own library, a graduate division, the College of Adult Scholars, and various other community-focused programs. Moellering Library was the main library on campus until the fall 2004 semester, when construction of a new building, called the Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources, was completed. The main library has over 340,000 print volumes. On staff, there are nine librarians, 13 support staff, and approximately 60 student assistants (per semester). Of those 60, approximately 10 are employed directly each semester by the reference, instruction, and web support departments.

Valparaiso University is a small campus, and while the library is one of the largest student employers on campus, those students available and interested in library reference services work are few. That, in combination with the campus policy that encourages keeping per-student work time to a minimum number of hours per week, keeps the student worker pool shallow. Statistics show a committed student staff after hiring, however, graduation, internships, and semesters spent studying abroad result in a relatively high turnover.

The library staff is small as well. As department heads, neither the Reference Services Librarian or the Instruction Services Librarian have professional or para-professional staff that report directly to them, making it essential to have well-trained, knowledgeable students available to work as close to the start of the semester as possible. Since management of the library web site has always been a part of the Instruction Services Librarian's job, a major portion of time is dedicated to it as well.

At VU's main library, there are nine librarians. Two librarians, the Dean of Library Services and the Cataloging Services Librarian, do not work in reference at all. Seven librarians work at the reference desk which is staffed 85 hours a week. Six of the seven (not including the Reference Services Librarian) librarians cover 25 hours a week (mainly evening and Sunday

hours). This leaves the Reference Services Librarian with 60 hours a week to cover by herself or with the help of student assistants. Without student help, covering these hours would be impossible. Regardless of whether it is ideal or not, having reference student assistants at VU is a necessity.

There is always the issue of the ever-evolving library. Policies change, databases change, and therefore, training is an ongoing project. In addition to revising the training program for each new crop of students, there must be a way to make sure changes reach current student assistants. In order to do this, the Reference Services Librarian used to send e-mails to student assistants announcing each change. However, some students were not reading the e-mails, or failing to retain the information they contained. A better, more accountable system was needed to support growth and change.

Finally, there has long been debate among librarians about the use of students on reference desks. Gabriela Sonntag expressed one of the positive aspects of using students by stating, "It has been shown that students are more likely to discuss their problems with, and feel less intimidated by other students." (Borin, 2001, p. 196) For others, the thought of having paraprofessionals, particularly undergraduate students, on the reference desk is troubling. Theoretically, having a reference librarian at the desk, always available to address and guide students' research questions is ideal; practically, many questions posed by the students are either quick reference referrals or technology-related. With the quality of patron satisfaction used as a guiding marker, it makes sense for well-trained student assistants to handle the most frequently asked questions, leaving the librarian available for the true research queries. Appropriately making that referral to the librarian demonstrates foundational understanding of true patron service by the student assistants.

REFERENCE SERVICES: OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION

Over the past four years, the reference assistant training program has constantly evolved. In summer 2000, the Head of the Reference department retired after 16 years. The Reference Services Librarian replaced the Head of Reference, and the positions are essentially the same, but the title changed. Until spring of 2000, there had also been a paraprofessional Reference Assistant who had assisted with training and supervision of students, but she left the position shortly before the Head of Reference retired. The Reference Assistant position was eliminated at that time.

Other than a few worksheets, there was very little print material left behind concerning student assistant training, largely because the student assistants had not answered reference questions until spring 2000 when the Reference Assistant left the position. The existing worksheets contained ready reference questions such as, “Where are the periodicals?” and “Where would I find Catch 22 by Joseph Heller?” These questions are good starting points, but do not help train students to answer more complicated reference questions. The only computer training students received was through the program LCEasy, which helps students shelve and become familiar with the Library of Congress call number system, but not with reference questions. Therefore, the new Reference Services Librarian had to start from scratch upon her arrival. Since she began her new position a week before the start of fall semester in 2000, there was virtually no training that first semester. Luckily, since the Reference Department employed ten students at that time, and because there had been few graduates the semester before, only one new student assistant had to be hired that semester. Therefore, the lack of an initial training

program only adversely affected one student assistant. It was in this situation that the Saturday afternoon eye-opening experience occurred for the Reference Services Librarian.

During that year, a training program began to develop. Departmental procedures and instructions for regular student assistants were either written down or created, and a few haphazard quizzes were drawn up. The second year of training (beginning fall 2001) was much more organized than the first, but still left much to be desired. That semester, there were four new students to train. By this time, there were also a number of written procedures and instructions to give students at the beginning of their training, as well as a general outline of training topics to cover. In addition, the students were tested at the end of their training on their retention of topics covered. This test covered important topics such as: how to locate a journal article when a patron comes to you with a citation, the name of the Dean of Library Services, and the layout of the library. Students reacted favorably to this test, saying that the practice was much more useful than verbal instruction. It required them to put into use what was demonstrated to them, as well as become familiar with the library website.

There were, however, several major drawbacks to this form of training. First, it was a one-time instruction session, and did not continue to test their knowledge. For example, when tax season arrived in spring 2001, the Reference Services Librarian sent out an e-mail to all students, explaining how to access tax forms. One of the student assistants came to that same librarian a week later, saying that a patron was looking for tax forms, asking where they were located. When the librarian asked whether the student had read the informational e-mail, the student replied that she had, but that she had forgotten the content. A continual training and testing program would ensure that students who did not retain information were identified, so that the problem could be rectified.

Another problem with the Reference training program was that there was no record of which students had been trained on what topics. Due to the primarily verbal nature of the training, unless the information was covered in the test, there was no record of what topics had been covered in conversation. Because of a lack of record, the Reference Services Librarian often had to ask students whether she had covered a particular topic with them. This did not reflect an efficient and organized program. A more reliable accounting system was needed. When training one student, it is not hard to remember what topics have been covered, but with four trainees, a training checklist is needed. Quizzes help account for which students have covered which topics, but a training checklist is now being used.

In VU's main library, certain computer programs have been used to help train our students for years. For example, every student assistant in both the Reference and Circulation departments uses LCEasy to learn about LC call numbers. However, beyond that program, most reference student training takes place through face-to-face instruction. This instruction consists of discussions about sources and reference tools, and during these discussions, the students also observe the Reference Services Librarian as she answers reference questions. Within the Reference Department, this training can take days. To some extent, face-to-face training is preferable to computer training, but because it is so time consuming, incorporating more computer and self-learning mechanisms became necessary. Self-guided work has a distinct advantage to in-person training; trainees learn to do work themselves instead of having to absorb knowledge by observation only. For example, one can show a trainee how to locate an article found in a database multiple times, but it probably will not be absorbed as well as when the librarian explains it once and then asks the student to perform the task by him/herself. During

the self-guided work, students have the opportunity to ask questions, which helps prevent frustration if they get stuck.

Ultimately, a combination of self-guided paper and computer-based training worked best. Originally, the quizzes were designed to be taken online using our campus courseware system. Then, in the beginnings of the quiz program, a student spent an hour working on a quiz online, only to lose his work. He accidentally pressed the “back” button on his browser before submitting the quiz, and lost all his answers. After that, a switch was made to paper quizzes.

An unexpected benefit of designing the quizzes was that the Reference Services Librarian found that her skills were refreshed. An expected detriment of creating the quizzes is the time involved. Most of the quizzes have about 10 questions, and it can take an entire morning to create the quiz, find the answers, and make an answer key. With the turnover of students, the questions can be re-used every couple of years. However, due to the continually changing nature of libraries and databases, many questions will have to be updated each time they are used.

The design of quiz questions is both a proactive and reactive process. It is proactive in the sense that some assignments are given every year and quiz questions are created in preparation for those assignments. For example, Valpo Core is the first-year-experience course for all but the honors college freshmen. It encompasses many disciplines including literature, theology, history, philosophy, and the arts. In the second semester of this class, the major paper assignment requires students to select a career, research the issues affecting it, and interview someone in that field. Currently, library instruction is not a requirement for Core, and subsequently, only one-fourth of the students receive class time with a librarian and the online course pathfinder. Many of the remaining three-fourths come to the reference desk for help. Anticipating this, there are extra print copies of the course pathfinders available at the reference

desk, reference student assistants can recommend the online version, and they have been quizzed on the career reference materials. Other quizzes and questions are created in response to actual queries received at the reference desk. Many patrons ask for literature reviews, so an entire quiz was devoted to this topic in response to these questions.

The reference student assistants are usually given quizzes every month, and most have come to enjoy the challenge. Some students score consistently high, while others continue to struggle. This has differentiated the students who need continual guidance from those who are doing well on their own. During late evening shifts and Saturdays, students work without a librarian present. Therefore, it is important that these solo students have strong reference skills. The quizzes have helped identify strong students, which aids in scheduling.

Some students finish the quizzes in one shift, while others struggle over several days, even a week. There is no time limit, which gives students time to explore the resources available to them. After they finish their quizzes, the Reference Services Librarian takes each student and individually goes over the quiz with them, commenting on things they have done well, other sources they might have considered, and questions they have answered incorrectly. This is time consuming, but an important aid in student learning.

At the end of the fall 2002 semester, several students approached the Reference Services Librarian and asked if they could design their own questions. The students made a little challenge out of it. Six out of seven students chose to participate. Each student came up with two questions, which they submitted to the Reference Services Librarian. She put them together, and the students took the quiz. They decided that the test would be scored based on how many questions they got correct, combined with the number of people who got their questions wrong. This was fun for them and gave their supervisor a break from quiz creation.

Although the Reference Department moved to paper quizzes, other Reference information was placed online. Due to frequent changes in the library, a print version of policies/procedures would be a waste of paper resources. The online information manual is easy to update and easy to access throughout the library. It contains the reference student schedule, directions on processing new reference books, shelf-reading, closing and opening procedures (for Reference), student duties, printing policy, directions on using the scanner, and other frequently used procedures and frequently asked questions. Students have commented how much they like the online format.

INSTRUCTION SERVICES: OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION

In determining need for student assistants in the Instruction Services, which also maintains a vast majority of the library's website, it is noted that these assistants have almost as much "frontline" importance as those working at circulation and the Reference desk. Many students are affected by the competence of the library instruction program as well as the library website, especially those students who access library resources while outside the library. The students who work in these areas not only support the instruction categories of the website but the site itself.

Instruction is a rapidly growing program within the library. Supported with a team format, it is subject liaison based, which allows the full range of user service librarians classroom contact with students and teaching faculty. Beginning fall 1999, each library session class has its own web page (pathfinder), tailored to assignments/needs of the class. This was done for a number of reasons and is especially useful when: teaching multiple session of the same class, teaching a class over several days, teaching make-up sessions, and giving the students a comprehensive

resource to assist in their assignment completion. Ninety-two web-based pathfinders were created in the 2000-01 academic year, with that number increasing to 111 in the 2002-03 year. While the librarians teaching the class are most often responsible for the content, it is the Instruction Services department that is charged with creating the actual pages themselves.

The Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources website is another area of rapid growth within the library. At this time, there are approximately 750 active pages, with increases anticipated each semester. While there are two other librarians managing specific areas of the site (reference/databases and government information/maps), the bulk of creating and updating falls to the Instruction Services Librarian. In fall 2003, a staff intranet site was added to the purview of this department as well.

Instruction Services training right now consists of spending time one-on-one with the students as they work through their first sessions with various duties. Though there is a print manual to guide them with basic questions, this one-on-one time is still very necessary. It also usually coincides with some of the busiest days as students are usually hired at the start of semesters. Hopefully, many of the techniques used in Reference Services training will be adaptable to all User Services student assistant training, including those in Instruction Services, Interlibrary Loan, and Circulation.

To assist in User Services, student assistants have to have more than just basic people skills and html coding abilities. Without becoming minors in library science, they must also have some understanding of how libraries work (especially VU's), why things are done in a particular way, and why the library website is sometimes the most individualized site on a campus website (providing resource access, resource information, general assistance—marks of a very interactive site). For them to be vested members of the library staff, they must feel supported in working on

their own but yet collegial enough to meet the need of various librarians/instructors, particularly those who are not their direct supervisors.

STUDENT ASSISTANT SURVEY

After the first semester of biweekly quizzes (fall 2002), reference student assistants were polled to see how they felt about the new training program. All Reference students took the survey. Eighty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that the quizzes had improved their reference skills. When asked to rate their reference skills before training, after the initial training, and at the time they were taking the survey, one hundred percent said that they felt more confident after the initial training. In addition, eighty-six percent felt that their skills had improved between the initial training and the time they took the survey. Following are some of their comments.

- “My reference training has greatly impacted my library use as a student. I believe I come to the library more often than I would have if I was not a reference assistant.”
- “I definitely know 5 times more about research and what is available than I used to. This has been a great job to have, and very helpful.”...“Every quiz, I learn something new.”
- “The quizzes are often much more difficult than any of the reference questions I typically get.”
- “It’s very hard to learn everything for your job in one or two sittings. It’s a job where you’re always learning through experiences you have.”
- “I was like a fish out of water initially and I felt overwhelmed with all the new information I had to absorb, but I now feel quite at ease helping anyone.”

Several students also offered suggestions. One suggested having a monthly training session that all student assistants would attend, although this is not feasible at this time due to staffing and student schedule issues. Another suggested having new student assistants shadow

more experienced students “so that they will have a better idea of what they’re doing once they actually start working.” This idea may be implemented in the future.

FOLLOW-UP: TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT

At the end of the 2002-03 academic year, reference student assistants were given a cumulative quiz. This quiz contained questions from previous quizzes, and helped identify how much of the information covered over the year remained with the students. The Reference Services Librarian kept a record of what sources she showed the students when going over quizzes, so there was a paper trail of material the students *should* have known. The cumulative quiz tested what they *actually* knew. When deciding which questions to include in the quiz, questions were evaluated based on how many students missed those questions, and the reasons the questions were missed. Were the questions missed because they were challenging, or because they were poorly worded or designed? For the final quiz, questions used were ones that were challenging, but not confusing, the first time around.

At the time the cumulative quiz was given, only five students were working in reference. One had been hired mid-year, and therefore had taken only half the monthly quizzes. The new student was picking things up quickly, and doing well, but she still scored several points lower (5 out of a possible 11 points) than any of the more experienced student assistants. Most of the questions she missed were harvested from quizzes she had not taken. The students who had taken all the quizzes did fairly well, most getting 8 or 9 correct out of 11.

Although the pool of students was small, the results of this final, cumulative quiz help illustrate how useful the quizzes are in teaching students research sources and skills. This combination of ongoing assessment, student feedback, and librarian response should help to

ensure that the training needs of our students are met while meeting the assistance needs of our patrons.

Unfortunately, only one student worked continuously from fall 2002 through spring 2004. No students quit their jobs, but due to students leaving and returning from study abroad experiences, student teaching, and attrition through graduation, there was almost 100% turnover over two years. Newly hired students started the quizzes from the beginning, and students returning from study abroad took quizzes that had been assigned in their absences. One new quiz style emerged in the 2003-2004 academic year. Instead of having students complete a series of questions, they might have to do some research on a particular topic. For example, in one quiz they had to find literary criticisms for Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Due to the high turnover, it was difficult to see the long-term effect of the training program.

CONCLUSION

When developing this training program, there seemed to be so much information to cover that it was hard to know where to begin. While it is true that there is a plethora of knowledge needed to effectively serve at the Reference desk, topics can be addressed individually in the quizzes, dividing them into subtopics that are much more manageable in depth and breadth.

With extensive training, Student assistants can effectively answer the majority of questions received at the Reference desk. Training is an ongoing process, not a one-shot session when students are initially hired. Spreading material out throughout the year allows students time to reflect on what they have learned, which encourages retention of knowledge more than an initial training period would. The training also appears to empower the student assistants so that they are more confident answering questions. One Student assistant recently commented

that he could see how an aspect of the research process would be difficult for the uninitiated, but that it was easy for “those of *us* in the (library) field”!

Here are some questions and possible topics for future research that arose from this project.

- Are student patrons more comfortable approaching their peers (fellow students) or would they prefer to work with librarians? Do they know the difference?
- How do teaching faculty feel about asking questions of students on the Reference desk?
- Is patron satisfaction affected when questions are answered by student assistants rather than librarians?
- How effective would it be to cross-train student assistants for different User Service departments (Reference, Instruction, Government Documents, Periodicals, and Circulation)?

The purpose of designing an effective training program for our students is that patrons will be better served. With training, Student assistants can answer the everyday research questions, and librarians can spend more time focusing on the patrons with complicated research queries, in addition to having more time to do other projects that will improve service for end-users.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE QUIZ QUESTIONS

1. Describe, in a few sentences, the difference between primary and secondary sources.
2. What were PROCTER & GAMBLE's net sales for the past five fiscal years? Where did you find this information?
3. Someone calls and says they are trying to access the Chronicle of Higher Education online, so they need the password. What is the password, and can you give it out to them?
4. What is the title and who wrote the poem that ends "Though but a cat lies buried here."
5. Find citations for two reviews of Barbara Kingsolver's book "Prodigal Summer." Write citation information here.
6. What is the name of the company that owns KFC? Source?
7. A patron comes in looking for the text of Title 27, chapter two of the U.S. Code. What are the subjects of the title and chapter?
8. The U.S. Code is published every 6 years. During the interim period, supplements are produced with updated laws. The government is currently producing the 2000 edition. We have received most of the updated 2000 edition, but not all. When the 2000 edition of Title 50 arrives, which 1994 volumes can be withdrawn? List them here.
9. Do we have this article here? If so, where? If not, what should you tell the patron?

Effects of Normal Aging and Alzheimer's Disease on Emotional Memory. By: Kensinger, Elizabeth A.; Brierley, Barbara; Medford, Nick; Growdon, John H.; Corkin, Suzanne;
Source: *Emotion*. Vol. 2 (2) June 2002, pp. 118-134

10. I want to do a database search for bibliographic instruction (BI) in colleges and high schools (that is, I want articles on BI that relate to either high school or college). Which of the following is the correct Boolean combination?
 - a. bibliographic instruction OR (college students AND high school students)
 - b. bibliographic instruction AND (college students OR high school students)

c. bibliographic instruction AND (college students AND high school students)