

Student Assistants Are Employees Too

Integrating Person-Centered Management into Student Employee Management

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Student employees help support many of the basic and not-so-basic functions of the library. Although there is no consensus on how to best manage student workers in libraries, they do require active management. Not only do student workers need support for work issues, such as payroll forms and interpersonal skills, but they are also simultaneously balancing school, work, personal lives, and physical and mental health.

This integral group of employees is often new to the workforce and works only a few hours each week, which presents different challenges than are faced with full-time employees. This chapter will detail how to implement person-centered management practices for student employees, outline concrete examples, and connect student development theory to person-centered management. Although our focus is academic libraries, the ideas in this chapter are translatable to other contexts.

PERSON-CENTERED MANAGEMENT AND STUDENT EMPLOYEES

Student employees exist in a dual role within the academic library, as both staff and patrons. Engaging in a person-centered management style helps students and managers understand the importance of this duality. Conversations about how classes are going expose services that can be implemented to help other students. Such dialogue also demonstrates that they are valuable to the organization and creates an environment that encourages feedback or suggestions. In certain cases the library may already offer something similar, and this can help the student construct a deeper understanding of the library's services, policies, and procedures.

Student employees are aware of the power dynamic that exists between manager and employee. Employing person-centered management demonstrates that each student is seen and valued, helps students feel comfortable navigating that power dynamic and raising issues, and establishes a deeper relationship with student employees. Managers can identify signs of struggle and work with students to address them. Assistance can take many forms, including helping with a difficult patron interaction, reimagining a process, or providing feedback on a résumé (Gibbons, 2016).

Student-employee training programs are often focused only on teaching students library procedures. Training tends to be task oriented and revisited only if issues arise. According to Evanson (2015), "Traditionally, training programs for student library employees have primarily addressed students in their 'employee' role by providing them with advanced responsibilities and projects, ensuring accuracy in library tasks, and encouraging professional workplace behavior" (p. 30). This task-based training model does not engage the student employees in critical thinking or encourage them to offer feedback on procedures. Rather it implies their only role is to fulfill basic tasks. Further development of student employees is often overlooked but is a central idea in person-centered management. Deeper engagement with student employees in the training process allows students to gain additional guidance and develop rapport.

There are two harder-to-quantify benefits for the library as well. Student employees ultimately serve as recruitment or warning for other job-seeking students. If student employees understand that there are both short- and long-term benefits to their professional development, they will encourage friends to apply for open positions at the library. Additionally, students can participate in the development of institutional culture and ethics (Bardy, 2018). Opening up and being responsive to the needs of this staffing population shows student employees that they are recognized within the organization and demonstrates how *all* staff are valued within the library.

Person-centered management approaches can take more time and effort than more traditional management styles. Student employees have a higher turnover rate than full-time employees, so is the effort well spent? It may seem counterintuitive to put effort into person-centered management for a set of employees who are working for only a few hours a week and may work for the library for only a few semesters. That belief negates the positive impact or effect that student employees can have on services, development, or the workplace while they are employed at the library. In addition, this is a formative time for student employees and exposes them to the library profession. Although students may not have entered school intending to work in libraries, student positions are a pipeline for future library staff and development possibilities for future colleagues.

CHALLENGES WITH STUDENT MANAGEMENT IN LIBRARIES

Student employees have played an integral part in academic libraries since the 1800s (Jewell Beckett & Murphy, 2020). Despite this long-standing role within academic libraries, student employee management is often siloed from other management concerns within the library. This siloing often begins in job descriptions for staff members; management of full-time or part-time employees is usually reflected in job status or pay, whereas the management of student employees often comes without elevated title or pay. The siloing is continued when speaking of how many people work in a department; full and part-time staff are

often mentioned first, and then student employees are an afterthought. This language creates a three-tier library hierarchy that places student employees on the lowest tier (Bowman & Samsky, 2020).

Many of the issues that occur with student management, including recruitment, hiring, training, retention, poor performance, decreased motivation, poor communication, and so on, are not unique. Understandably student employees view themselves as students first and employees second (Constantinou, 1997). Most library managers also understand that student employees are students first. This framing can alter the way that library staff approach managing and create its own unique set of challenges. Priority must be given to classes, projects, and exams, but that can lead to inconsistent staffing and require flexibility to solve staffing issues.

For many students, working in the library is their first job (Constantinou, 1997). This means that a supervisor not only trains them for the library job but also exposes them to and prepares them for the workforce, which can be a time-consuming endeavor. For many supervisors, “there often remains a sense in this and related work that training students is onerous and that it distracts and diverts librarians and library staff from more substantive and important work” (Vine, 2020). Student-employee work may be seen as not requiring as much skill or as less important than the work of full-time staff, but this viewpoint can create undesirable outcomes. The student may get the message that the job is not essential and therefore will not take it seriously. This can lead to poor performance, such as not showing up to work, providing poor customer service, or quitting, as they would rather find a job where their work is valued. This can also have unintended consequences for library patrons. Students are often in frontline positions or complete the first step in a back-of-house process. If not trained properly, they can cause work processes to fail, and this in turn can lead to patrons losing faith in the library and its services.

Full-time library staff and students can view this job as a means to pay bills until the student gets a real job after graduation. This mentality lends itself to not seeing the importance of the work they are doing (Farrell & Driver, 2010). When a job is seen as temporary or a means to an end, students have no internal motivation or connection to the

training that staff are providing. Part of the supervisor's job is to help student employees make a connection to the impact their work has on themselves, their peers, and the university as a whole.

Although student employees are less expensive to employ than full-time staff, budget and financial cutbacks can make hiring a challenge. To supplement the budget, library departments may be required to hire only federal work-study students. This requirement "may make it difficult to attract students to work in the library and it may also limit the number of hours they are eligible to work" (Matteson & Hankison, 2018, p. 487). If other jobs offer higher wages, the library may not be the most desirable place for a student to work. A smaller pool of students to choose from can make it difficult to staff the library to desired levels, creating additional stress for full-time staff and other student employees because their taking time off creates coverage gaps.

Students are balancing work and school, as well as learning to navigate these two environments. They are responsible for completing forms and time sheets, learning time management skills, and developing critical thinking skills. As they are learning all of this, we are setting the bar for their next employer, modeling how to be a manager to them and developing the skills that they will take into the workforce after college.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PERSON-CENTERED MANAGEMENT

Although student affairs professionals have used student development theory, it has not been applied in student employment. In keeping with the concept that all employees have different needs and issues affecting them, managing students with the same toolbox used for other employees is not helpful. Student development theory can provide structure and guidance for managers who employ students, as it helps recognize the tactical and interpersonal skills that students should develop in a higher education setting. Long (2012) has taken various theories of student development models and put them into four broad families of theories: psychosocial theory, cognitive-structural theory, person-environment interactive theory, and humanistic-existential theory.

Psychosocial Theory of Student Development

Psychosocial theory examines the important issues or crises students face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives. In this theory, students self-reflect on who they are and go through phases of conflict about what that identity means for them as they develop and grow (Long, 2012).

With this understanding that student employees are developing and growing as their lives change, it is important to have check-ins with them. Weekly or monthly check-ins with student employees can be difficult with their limited availability of work hours each week, and formalized check-ins can be scary for some. It is possible to do quicker, on-the-fly check-ins with students to establish and continue connection building. These check-ins might be shorter, but it is still important to give them our full attention. Following up to ask about how a test or project went or congratulating them on an accomplishment, such as a presentation outside of class, shows that we are engaged with what is going on in their world. Taking time to compliment them as the work goes on or they add a new skill shows students that they are seen and that we are invested in their growth. This work of seeing is important and takes only a few minutes.

Establishing a norm around pronouns helps create a space where everyone's personhood is respected in the workplace. However, that norm should be about not only normalizing the use of pronouns but also creating a structure for people to change their pronouns, if desired. Whom should the student talk to? How do we keep other colleagues up-to-date?

Managing students through this phase of their lives, we can put them on projects that let them tap into who they are as individuals. As patrons themselves, student workers know the needs and wants of students and can identify areas of improvement in services offered by the library. Racial identity, one part of this theory, can help explain the various ways that students approach, negotiate, and understand their identity as racial beings and how it affects other aspects of their lives (Kodama et al., 2002). Tapping into this, students can assist with the curation of collections and displays, as they identify sources that connect

to the various identities that they have or the different vectors in their lives. This work should be done only if the student wants to connect to their identity in this way, and not as a means to tokenize them.

Cognitive-Structural Theory of Student Development

Cognitive-structural theory, which examines the intellectual development of college students, “addresses a sequence of meaning-making structures through which students perceive, organize, and make sense of their experiences” (Abiddin & Ismail, 2012, p. 216). Using cognitive-structural theory framing, we can observe our students learn to question the *why* behind the work they do, which allows them to gain a greater understanding of the importance of the work.

When training and onboarding, it is important to tell students how they help serve the library mission and that their work is important to the success of the library. Connecting student employees to the library mission happens on two levels: helping student employees understand how they help forward the library mission and making that connection for full-time staff at the library and for stakeholders outside the library. In the abstract, it can be difficult to understand how interactions at the desk or a new book can help the community. Identifying how those smaller moments lead to larger success can create buy-in from students and help them feel their work is valuable.

As they are examining and questioning is the best time to see if they notice any improvements that can be made in workflows and processes. During check-ins, we can ask student employees what they wished was better about the library or if any services for students are lacking. This is a great way to exercise this theory as it gets students thinking and asking questions about possible changes.

Information is not always shared with student employees; library-wide mailing lists often do not include student employees, nor are they regularly consulted or updated before changes are implemented. These communication gaps should be examined with a person-centered management lens and rectified, and new paths for communication should be considered to best suit all employees. This includes explaining why unpopular or hard choices are being made within the library. This is

especially important with students, who are often the first people that a patron approaches at the circulation or reference desk. Within this management style is the belief, especially with frontline staff, that if staff members are happy, the customer will ultimately be happy (Plas & Lewis, 2000).

Communication is not just a one-way e-mail about changes and updates; it also means seeking feedback before launching or changing service. Student employees should understand changes might be made regardless of their feedback but also know that it has been heard and considered. As mentioned earlier, students' dual role as employees and patrons allows for feedback or identification of issues that might be missed by full-time employees who may have only one role in the community.

Student employment is one area within the library where a high turnover rate is desirable, as we want student employees to go on to fulfilling lives, often outside academia. It is important to establish how students can connect a position to their chosen field, which requires understanding their field and what skills are important. We should ask them to tell us about internships or jobs they are interested in, so we can understand how to coach them and help them learn how to translate their library job duties relevantly in cover letters or résumés.

Person-Environment Interactive Theory of Student Development

In person-environment interactive theory, the interaction is between the individual and the environment. The environment affects the individual and vice versa. Much of the focus of this theory is on how the university's environment can impede or foster student development and on creating an environment where a student can excel (Long, 2012).

When working with student employees, it is important to remain aware of the academic calendar, to understand breaks and stressful moments that student employees may be balancing with work, and to ask if any adjustments need to be made to their work schedules. However, although the academic calendar can provide guidance, not all projects or assignments are based on this schedule. Being aware and bringing these topics into conversation allows students the space and opportunity to

ask for adjustments. This is especially important for those students who may worry about disappointing management or being fired. We must recognize the role that the workplace and workplace stress play in student employees' lives (Office of the Surgeon General, 2022). Student employees balance many different roles in their lives. A strong relationship gives them space to ask for help when needed.

When someone says they are struggling or failing in a class, finding the right words to say might be difficult. Rather than rely on simple reassurances such as "I am sure you will pass," we should instead ask more pointed questions like "Is work affecting your ability to pass this class?" and "Do you need us to revise your schedule?" As with any staff member, if a student worker feels that a manager sees them, is aware of their struggles, and offers them a moment to talk about their issues, they will be more willing to share with them. If the manager knows a student worker's patterns and behaviors, it is easier to identify changes to those and proactively check in.

In Long's research on this theory, he found theorist Astin's take is that academic performance is correlated with student involvement (Astin, 1984, as cited in Long, 2012). The library and working in the library can create a unique opportunity to foster this. Through work in the library, students can meet other students outside their major, living situation, and year, as well as help other students who may be in their major or year. When considering onboarding or training programs, managers should consider the importance of creating a space for socialization as well.

Tinto's model of retention is similar, as it focuses on student feelings of belonging and mattering being correlated with more commitment to an institution and continued persistence (Tinto, 1993, as cited in Barbaro, 2021). Working in the library can contribute to feelings of belonging and thus to students' academic success. Utilizing this theory, a manager could consider adding a student worker, especially a library science graduate student, to committees to demonstrate that their voice matters.

Humanistic-Existential Theory of Student Development

Humanistic-existential theory approaches the student as a whole person and explores the relationships students have with others and society.

According to Long (2012), “These theories emphasize the conditions for healthy growth and development and less on the development itself. Balance, harmony, and purpose are significant values that underlie humanistic-existential theories” (p. 50). Hettler et al.’s (1980) model of wellness expounds on the humanistic-existential theory and explicates the relationship between development and wellness. Hettler et al. (1980) explain that “comprehensive wellness promotion on the university campus has the potential to increase students’ retention in academic programs” (p. 79). Focusing on wellness will also help a student’s future. According to Hettler et al. (1980), “people with positive self-concepts, high energy levels and positive human relationship skills have a competitive edge in the modern Western world” (p. 81).

Our job as managers of students in this framework is to check in with students and ensure that they have balance. Even in the work that we assign, we can provide them with opportunities to build transferable skills. Although providing financial security in the form of a job, we may also have students who are experiencing housing or food insecurity. We can learn about their particular needs, if they feel comfortable sharing, to help support them so that they can flourish in school, their job, and life.

As with any new coworker, establishing a rapport takes effort. Question asking often creates a connection for the student to talk to you later. The questions do not have to be too complicated or in depth to start, for example:

How are classes going? How many classes are you taking this semester? I am looking for a new show/movie to watch—what are you enjoying right now?

Undergraduates and graduates can have different needs. First-generation or nontraditional students may require help navigating issues outside of the work environment. Each student has different issues they are dealing with, and each student group faces different challenges.

Do you live on campus or commute? How are you getting to work? Do you know about the Veterans Services office on campus? Have you found any affordable hairdressers

near campus? Do you know about the child care services on campus? Do you know about the scholarships that are available throughout the year?

Student employees will bring a variety of job experiences with them. They may have been exposed to person-centered management, but more likely not. It is important to model how this management style works and what to expect from this work environment. This can happen by letting them know what we need to succeed as managers and asking them what they need as employees. This can be as simple as establishing communication styles and letting them know we want to learn these things about them.

Managers are responsible for student-employee development, which includes tough conversations about improvement and feedback. Any manager would be forgiven for wanting to avoid difficult feedback, but ultimately doing so is a disservice to the staff member (student or not). This feedback is important at this stage, as student employees will take what they've learned to their next position (Gibbons, 2016). By not engaging with difficult issues or working to fix ongoing problems, student employees may not realize or understand the consequences of certain actions or behaviors. Unfortunately, even with these conversations and investment in the student employees, there will be occasions when someone needs to be let go.

The reality is that student employees may leave for other opportunities, such as internships or fellowships, that may align with their career goals. What is avoidable is causing students to depart their library job because we have not made them feel welcome or safe. Students become connected with other student employees and staff at their jobs, and “staff members who take an interest in students’ academic progress and general wellbeing—but, unlike faculty members, are not involved in evaluating their course work—often become supportive mentors or even surrogate parents for students who work with them” (Noel-Levitz, 2010, p. 3). As staff we can, on one hand, contribute to students’ academic success and, on the other, unintentionally cause a student to quit their jobs or, worse, drop out of school because we don’t care about them as whole human beings.

PERSON-CENTERED MANAGEMENT FOR THE MANAGER

Management is work. It requires commitment to others and commitment to personal boundaries. Although it is important to engage in thinking about how to improve the job and provide development for student employees (Plas & Lewis, 2000), it can also be tiring to balance asking questions multiple times a day, not only about student employees but also about all staff in the department, and other job responsibilities.

Establishing these relationships is built on quality time rather than copious time spent with student employees (Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2022). It is important to recognize that time spent with a student employee does not always mean management, development, or relationship building is happening. As with any colleague, being in the same space without conversation or investment in learning about each other does not make a relationship.

Developing a student management team can help with all aspects of this process. Depending on the scheduling of work hours and the department, it may not be possible to see or connect with every student employee. Asking colleagues to join and participate in student management can be very beneficial. Aspects of hiring, training, scheduling, and development of student employees take time and may not be tasks one person can take on alone.

Another way to help with the management of this workload is to look for other departments in the library that have student employees and partner with them to develop shared resources and structures. Certain training topics, such as sessions on payroll, library structure, or safety, could be beneficial for all library departments. Development events, such as résumé reviews, book clubs, and job shadowing, would benefit all student employees in the library, not just those in one department, and the work to plan and schedule these events can be shared across multiple departments. Not only does this sharing of work make it easier to develop resources; it also provides managers with a support network to discuss issues around student management.

Part of the difficulty of person-centered management is that each person being managed is unique. In some situations our past experiences can help us understand how to navigate the present situation, but

there might not always be a relevant experience to draw upon for help. As life goes on, new and different concerns must be addressed. As with all management, student management is a living, growing thing. A few years ago no one would have been prepared to manage students through a pandemic, but we now have intimate knowledge of this process. Managers do not have to be experts in all options and all variables; with person-centered management there should be a willingness to understand what is needed and to do research to determine what can be done. Saying to a student employee that they are heard and that work will be done to determine if help is possible demonstrates to them that they are seen and valued much more than will laying out a cookie-cutter solution.

CONCLUSION

In a few years of managing students, the authors have helped student employees navigate work while also helping them to deal with these issues: pregnancy; death in the family; becoming a caretaker for a parent; being a caretaker for a sibling; suddenly becoming disabled; surviving police brutality; surviving sexual assault as well as financial aid issues, which caused a student to have to drop out of school. It is important to acknowledge that many of these changes are not solvable with person-centered management or any management style. However, because of person-centered management styles that had been employed prior to these situations, we were able to understand what was happening to these student employees and adjust schedules and workloads to help them navigate some of these moments. Managers should not take on these issues as their own to solve but rather act in a manner to help student employees exist in the workplace while dealing with them.

If a manager has developed a relationship with the student employee, they can identify times the student may need help. It might be as simple a thing as a patron interaction, but at times it may be a more complicated issue, such as feeling burdened with work and school or any of the myriad issues that students face on campus. This is a moment when managers need to recognize they are probably not the best person to help in the long run. Although we might be able to help with resources, it is best to refer the student to other trained organizations, on and off

campus. These connections should not be limited to physical and mental health groups but also include other resources, such as financial services, that can be used as connection points for student employees who need help in these areas.

Person-centered management encourages the manager to see the whole person, but this does not mean we should be best friends with student employees (Plas & Lewis, 2000). It is important to engage in relational authenticity whereby both parties understand their roles, the boundaries, and how they affect the other (Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2022). This is a very powerful connection and role, on both sides. Some may prefer to be seen as a friend rather than a boss. This can lead to students and managers not understanding unspoken boundaries and rules in the workplace. Many of these lessons can be learned through direct communication with the student, but many lessons must be learned indirectly as well. With these positions, student employees are learning how to act in workplaces, and that behavior will be carried with them to future jobs. Just as a small act of kindness can demonstrate how we should treat coworkers, inappropriate behavior can lead student employees to believe either that it is okay to act that way or that they have to accept that behavior from others.

Person-centered management and the student development theory can help with retention and making students feel welcomed and safe. Student workers are developing not only the skills to work in the library but also interpersonal and tactical skills that will help them in higher education and future employment. These skills are ones that student development theory emphasizes and are being enacted in other parts of the higher education setting. Although this work in higher education is often not included in conversations about learning, the reality is that students are learning in these positions as well. At the very least, these are lessons and expectations they will take with them into their chosen fields.

Developing a robust management program for student workers cements the library as a quality employer on campus and demonstrates how the library helps develop students in a multitude of ways. It can foster a greater buy-in from student workers to improve the library and its services as students feel respected and know that their input is valued. There are aspects to be mindful of when implementing such a

program; as with all management styles, but even more so, developing and maintaining the relationships built with person-centered management requires time, energy, and boundaries. This work does not have to be perfect, and striving for perfection is impossible.

Implementing a person-centered management approach for student employees will make us better managers. We must come with the intention to improve our management styles and the student workers while respecting all parties. It is possible to do this work alone, but it is better to seek input and help from colleagues—sharing the workload makes this easier, and it also increases perspective, which can be helpful. From the outside, this work may seem daunting, but ultimately it is very beneficial for the managers, the employees, and the entire organization. Person-centered management with the student development theory helps student workers develop as colleagues and people, not just workers.

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