

LIBRARY MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT WORK

CAROL SMALLWOOD, EDITOR

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
CHICAGO 2011

33

HIRING AND TRAINING GRADUATE ASSISTANTS FOR THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

Erin O'Toole

THE RESEARCH and instructional services department of the University of North Texas Libraries employs eleven graduate assistants (GAs) to provide face-to-face and virtual reference services. Two subject librarians have developed procedures and practices that simultaneously streamline management and motivate the GAs to provide consistently professional reference service. Try these tips for hiring and training to improve your GA program.

HIRING

When you are considering graduate students for employment, their employment histories, education record, and personalities are more important than their fields of study. Students with the following qualifications make the best employees:

- customer service or teaching experience
- passion to help people
- stability in school and employment records
- working knowledge of Microsoft Office and Web 2.0 applications
- outgoing personality

Design your interview with open-ended questions, giving applicants the opportunity to tell you their experiences. Remove jargon from interview questions and add examples of the information you seek, such as these:

- What computer software have you used, such as Microsoft Office, Photoshop, or Dreamweaver?
- Do you have experience with Facebook, Twitter, blogging, or other social networking tools?
- With which electronic library resources are you familiar? Some examples are journal article databases like EBSCOhost databases, encyclopedias, and bibliographic managers.

Many students do not read the job description carefully because they get excited at the prospect of making money. You can eliminate ill-matched applicants and reduce misunderstandings with GAs by explaining the graduate assistantship requirements

and department's expectations at the interview. Carefully review a handout of the employment conditions with the applicant. Besides salary, these are the most important facts to cover:

- number of enrollment hours required per semester
- number of work hours required per week and over the year
- requirements for evening and weekend shifts
- activities allowed during shifts
- dress code
- procedures for sick and vacation days
- frequency of paychecks
- details of benefits
- availability of summer and postgraduate employment

Encourage applicants to take the handout home, review it, and contact you with any questions. After completing a set of interviews, wait at least two days before offering a position to allow the applicants time to consider whether the job suits them.

ORIENTATION

Orientation is the time to start motivating GAs to provide excellent reference service by giving them the overall picture of your library system, explaining their vital place in it, and making them feel welcome. Spend about twenty training hours off-desk and include the following activities to promote inclusion:

- Show GAs the locations of restrooms, mailboxes, staff lounge, and lockers.
- Introduce GAs to the department staff.
- Introduce GAs to the administrative assistant who handles timesheet and payroll issues.
- Teach GAs how to use the time clock software.
- Arrange for GAs to visit with an IT employee to learn computer applications and authentication procedures.
- Tour other departments in the library and introduce GAs to staff.
- Give GAs cheat sheets to help them remember the names of library employees.
- Place pictures and welcoming articles about new GAs in your library newsletter.

Spend the remaining time discussing library policies, procedures, and resources. A wiki on the library's intranet is a convenient place to store this information because

NO JARGON

Even if applicants are library and information science students, do not expect them to recognize library jargon in interview questions. When training GAs, be careful to explain any jargon, because they generally will not tell you when they are confused.

it can be updated quickly when policies and resources change and accessed easily by anyone in the organization. Create sample patron questions that require GAs to locate the following policies and procedures on the library website:

- services and policies for reference, reserves, circulation, and interlibrary loan
- library hours and calendar
- library building and collection locations
- emergency procedures

New GAs can do resource training independently with tutorials, sample questions, and answer keys that you have stored in a wiki. Be sure to follow up with GAs after the completion of each worksheet and check for comprehension. Academic libraries have more resources than GAs can learn during orientation, so prepare training materials for representative resources:

- FAQs about books and journal articles
- databases with thesauri
- databases from different vendors
- databases with special functions, such as Web of Science
- multidisciplinary reference resources

One of the most difficult resources for GAs to master is the online catalog. Most are not prepared for the intricacies of cataloging. Some features that confuse them are unusual status codes, multiple entries for different formats, and Continuing and Continued By records for periodicals that have changed titles.

ONGOING TRAINING

After orientation, continue training GAs at weekly meetings of one to two hours during the academic year to keep them current on news about university, library, and resource changes. Bring in different presenters from your library and incorporate active learning to keep them interested in the following activities:

- training in multidisciplinary and subject-specific resources
- training in communication and web development software
- training in instructional methods
- practicing resource presentations
- touring library departments
- role playing of reference skills

MAKE A HANDOUT

Whenever you find yourself explaining or recording information for GAs more than twice, make a form or handout. The initial outlay of time and labor is worth the time saved later and the resulting management consistency.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is daily training. GAs need information every day in order to offer outstanding service. Use several modes of communication for different functions: e-mail, wikis, and instant messaging.

Train GAs to check their e-mail on a daily basis, even if they are not scheduled to work. E-mail is the best mode for handling individual issues, such as scheduling conflicts, vacation days, or anything else that requires a personal response. It is also appropriate for sending out deadlines or projects to the entire team.

A wiki is an appropriate tool for pushing information out to GAs and librarians working reference shifts. It is faster for staff to open a wiki page at the shift's start and find reference information there than to sift through individual e-mail for answers. Additionally, all reference staff can add information to these suggested wiki pages:

- reference news—daily events and changes
- class assignments FAQs
- technology and equipment FAQs
- stumpers—unusual reference questions and their answers

Use instant messaging to maintain an open line of communication with GAs who are working reference shifts. GAs can contact librarians about difficult reference questions, desk coverage, problem patrons, and other time-sensitive matters.

You can have a team of enthusiastic, high-performing GAs at your library by following the tips described in this chapter for hiring and training. They will be motivated and loyal because you included them in the library organization, prepared them to do professional reference work, and supported them with multiple modes of communication. The GAs will develop into first-rate future librarians, possibly for your own library.