

# MANAGING AND MOTIVATING STUDENT EMPLOYEES

Tips & Tricks from the Field

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Good morning everyone, my name is Marcella Huggard & I am the manuscripts processing supervisor at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, part of the University of Kansas Library system. I've been at KU since October 2015, not quite 4 years, and this is my first real experience supervising student employees.

- ▶ Supervise manuscripts processing
- ▶ 5-7 student employees typically
- ▶ Mostly undergraduates, some graduate students
- ▶ Students coming out of art & art history, history, architecture, graphic design, journalism, environmental sciences, law school, political science, linguistics, etc.
- ▶ Students perform all steps of manuscripts processing

## ABOUT MY SHOP

- No library program, museum studies program
- Most students are undergraduates coming from a variety of majors who will not be going into archives as a career

I typically have 5-7 students in my unit at any given time, and many of these students are undergraduates coming from a variety degree backgrounds. We don't have a library or archives program at KU, we have a museum studies program, so I do sometimes get students out of that program, but not always.

- Most lit coming out of academic libraries, from a public services perspective
- Not a lot has been written from archives, museum studies, public history
- Some written from technical services (cataloging); most archives discussions are generic and don't get into a lot of details

## STUDENTS WORKING IN CULTURAL HERITAGE

- Most lit coming from academic librarianship
- Archives lit mostly outdated/older
- Public history and museum lit focused mostly on students who will be going into cultural heritage as a career- same for archives lit to some extent
- Academic libraries lit simply talking about students who need a job

Because I'm pretty new to this, I wanted to see what people have to say about supervising student employees. Most of the lit, perhaps unsurprisingly, is coming from academic libraries—a group that even have entire books devoted to the topic. Other sectors of the broad cultural heritage field are behind this curve by a lot. The archival literature, for the most part, is pretty generic and very, very minimal.

- Academic library lit: undergraduate and graduate students
  - No expectation of librarian career
- Archives and public history lit: career-driven students

## STUDENTS WORKING IN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Particularly of interest to me in doing this lit review was that the academic library literature talks a lot about undergraduate and graduate student employees who don't necessarily have any intention or plan of going into library work themselves—at least, that often is not the focus of the articles and books. On the other hand, in the public history/museum studies literature and—to a slightly lesser degree—in the archives literature, the focus is on (normally graduate) students looking to this work at least as a possible career focus.

- Jobs on campus frequently benefit students
- Learning experience for students
  - Professional skills
  - Professional workplace experience
  - Introduction to alternative career paths
- Students as advocates for your archives

## BENEFITS FOR AND OF STUDENT WORKERS



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- Professional work skills
- Bring students over to the dark side of the archives!
- Students might tell their friends “This is a great place to work” or “I think I might know a collection that could help your research project!”

The lit in academic libraries & other fields indicates that student retention rates are positively affected by students having on-campus jobs (depending somewhat on the job; library jobs are usually a good thing). Whether or not the students working for you go onto have careers in archives, they are learning valuable professional skills and gaining workplace experience. This can also be an introduction to the dark side, I mean to the archives, particularly for undergraduate students, who may never have stepped inside an archives before but heard about your job opening and thought it sounded interesting.

Some of the lit points to students who enjoy working in your archives becoming advocates—telling other students it’s a good place to work and/or telling them about the research they can do there. I would argue this can also point to later advocacy—one of the students I recently hired mentioned her dad had worked at our research library and told her it would be a great place to work.

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- Training is key
  - Training options: blended learning
  - Include orientation and introduction
  - Practice, not theory

## MANAGEMENT 101



Introducing students to staff

- Newly hired students; training is key
- Manuals (online or in paper) and hands-on interaction with supervisor in order to ask questions
- Orientation to where archives stands in institutional context
- Introduce students to staff to help students feel like part of the team & so staff know who these students are

When starting to manage students, training is key. Blended training—i.e. having hands-on, face-to-face interaction and having students read manuals (whether in paper or online) is key. Training should start with an orientation to the archives and its place in the larger context of your institution. You should introduce students to other staff, both so they feel like a part of the team and so other staff know who they are and that they're supposed to be in secured areas. Training should also focus more on the practical aspects of the work students will be doing, particularly for students who are not pursuing this as a career—you can introduce more of the theory for those who ask questions and who might be interested in looking at archives as a career option.

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- Position descriptions
- Providing feedback

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS 101

Hopefully when you hire, you have position descriptions available for student jobs, outlining what the positions will be doing. Position descriptions can be fairly generic, and once you've hired students you might match them to tasks and projects that suit their interests and abilities, but you want to manage their expectations and yours. Few archives jobs allow for students to sit at a desk doing homework, unlike some other academic library jobs (some!).

When you're training, and later when the students have been trained, you want to provide immediate feedback if there's a problem, whether that problem is incorrectly inputting information in a finding aid or failing to QA a digitization project properly. (Immediate meaning within the next couple days of their schedule.) Have them redo the work so it reinforces what they should be doing. Don't be shy about providing feedback; also let them know when they're doing a great job. I usually try to do a combo when I can—"You did this part really well, but you forgot to add a top container to the archival object," that kind of thing.

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Like full-time staff, you want to do annual evaluations. (I'm really bad about this.) Any feedback and rating you provide should not be a surprise to the student, but it's good to check in with them more formally—again, this is more professional workplace experience, and it gives you both an opportunity to discuss work performance and work behaviors. At the same time, if you're able to give positive evaluations, the student can use that information going forward when looking for other jobs.

- Help students with prioritization
- Consistent communication
- Flexibility and patience (on your part)

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS 101

You as supervisor need to be consistent in your communication with ALL your students. I usually send out email blasts for anything everybody needs to know (state holidays when we're closed, reminders about security and access to the processing area, requests for semester schedules, that kind of thing). Maybe you have a centralized Trello or project management tool where you can make those kinds of announcements and reminders, or maybe you have a bulletin board—something somewhere to make sure all students know they need to go and to get that info. You'll also need to help students set their priorities—if they're working in public services and there's ongoing projects to reshelve and shift in the stacks and sort serials, but the priority is to respond to researcher copy requests, make that clear to them.

At the same time, you need to be more flexible with your students than you do with paraprofessional or professional staff. The number one priority for students, I think we can all agree, is their studies. If they ask you to take a shift off to go to an exam review or make it to a professor's office hours—if they ask you with enough notice, *particularly* if they have a public-facing role—try to accommodate. Know that finals week is going to be a mess with student hours—if you're prepared for that, you'll have more patience when your students tell you they can't make it in at all that week.

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- Free food
- Recognition
  - Increasing responsibility
  - Awards
  - Raises in pay

## MOTIVATION 101



So how do we keep our students motivated to keep coming into work and not find jobs elsewhere on- or off-campus?

The first thing, always, is free food. You don't have to be a master baker—though homemade goodies definitely go over well—you can bring in veggies, prepackaged cookies or chips, sodas, anything will be appreciated by your students. If you are making homemade stuff, try to be aware of allergies and sensitivities—at least let people know there's peanuts or whole wheat flour or strawberries in the baked item.

Recognition is a big motivator for everyone, whether or not they're a student—let them know they're doing a good job, and reward them for it. This might mean increasing responsibility—a more complicated project, or asking them to take on a different task, or even having more experienced students train new students.

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At KU Libraries we have three standard rates of pay for student employees with step increases for the difficulty in the work; there's a 4<sup>th</sup> rate that varies wildly for truly complex work (usually only given to graduate students and usually for skills including language as well as the tasks involved—my boss had a student assigning and cleaning up subject headings, for example). I get to start my students at the highest standard level of pay because they are processing manuscripts; other student supervisors in the research library might start their students at the lower end of pay but will increase their pay when they are trained and start taking on more complicated work.

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- Give students agency
- Give students opportunity to suggest improvements
- Give students opportunity to use their classroom work in your archives

## MOTIVATION 101

It's not just about increasing responsibility either—give your students the agency to perform their work in a way that suits them, within the parameters you provide. I train students in the overall mechanics and practicalities of processing manuscript collections but I don't tell them they have to stamp and label all their folders before they can start doing data entry, or that they have to [what] before they can [what]. Some things I try to get them to do sooner rather than later—if they've identified something needing conservation review, for example—but I don't dictate all steps in their workflows because they know how best they work or they are using this job to figure that out.

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## MOTIVATION 101

Also give students agency in the bigger picture, whether it's within a specific project or more generally. I've had students who were getting ready to leave suggesting improvements to the manual; I've given students special projects with some ideas about how to follow through and listened when they came up with alternative ideas. Again, giving people ownership in the process makes them more invested and proud of the work.

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## MOTIVATION 101

I hire students for a wide variety of reasons—I look for students who mention writing in their backgrounds (journalism or English degrees, specific writing projects or jobs), who can handle variety and tedium at the same time, who are interested in this specific job and not just sending me the generic cover letter they use for every job they're applying for. But sometimes I also hire students in a more targeted fashion because of what they're majoring in—I had an architecture student who was thinking about focusing on designing museums; he spent most of his 2 or 3 years with us working on collections of architectural drawings. I had a graduate fine arts student I assigned to work on a large collection from a natural history art illustrator. Students with strong German language backgrounds have worked on German collections. I haven't necessarily sought these students out when posting job openings, but if they've applied and interviewed well, I have a good enough sense of what's in my processing queue to put two and two together.



THANK YOU!

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Resources: <https://tinyurl.com/y66pbzad>

Session 603, Monday morning 10:30-11:45 in Grand Salon 1/2 – Join us!

If you want to talk more about supervising students, a large group of us is going to be leading small group facilitated discussions in “Students Transforming the Archives” Monday morning at 10:30. Please come join us! A bibliography of sources I used for this presentation, compiled by me and some of the other session members, is at the link on the slide. Thanks, everyone!