

REPORT OF THE STUDENT EMPLOYEES
SERVICE QUALITY COMMITTEE

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BACKGROUND

In February 2005 the Public Services Steering Committee (PSSC) formed the Student Employee Service Quality (SESQ) Committee. Prompted by survey comments from the 2004 LibQUAL+ that indicated a **discrepancy between public service attitudes of regular staff and student staff**, this group was created to recommend ways of improving the customer service attitudes of student employees across the departments.

In an initial meeting with the PSSC, SESQ Committee goals were discussed and refined. The Committee was given a two-month timeframe to complete objectives and to report back to the larger Public Service Committee (PSC). The first goal, the **creation of a set of public service behavioral guidelines applicable to all student employees** working in public areas, was to be modeled on the Smathers Libraries' "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Service Providers" (<http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/ps/risc/rischome.html>). The second goal was to **form recommendations for the implementation of these guidelines**, for the creation of cohesive training procedures, and for the recognition of exemplary public service by student employees.

INVESTIGATION & FINDINGS

To meet the timeframe established during the initial meeting with the PSSC, members of the SESQ Committee combined comments obtained from current supervisors and student employees with existing survey and focus group data. There were four sources available:

- student supervisor service quality interviews
- LibQUAL+ (2004)
- student employee questionnaires
- "Library Design Student Workshop Feedback" (from the University of Florida Libraries' Communications with Users Group, 2005)

Student Supervisor Service Quality Interviews

The SESQ Committee identified fifteen supervisors of student assistants from various departments and interviewed them. The interviews were informal meetings during which the Committee members questioned supervisors and noted responses. The process served a dual purpose: both to inform supervisors about the Committee and let them know that their opinions would be solicited, and to gather information across the departments on supervisor impressions of student service quality, hiring procedures, training practices, and policies for evaluation.

The first group of questions was related to the perceived public service quality of student employees. The **majority of supervisors rated their students'** public service performance between "**good**" and "**excellent.**" Reported **strengths include** students'

- **aptitude** for training
- **positive** attitudes
- **ability to relate** to student patrons

The most common **weaknesses cited** were **lack of knowledge** of the collection, **poor reference skills**, and **little work experience**. Notably, only half of this group of supervisors was aware of the behavioral performance standards.

Hiring processes vary among divisions and branches. Given six qualities and asked to rank them in order of preference for hiring, most supervisors placed **previous public service experience most high**. This was followed by

- previous job experience
- having a resume
- appearance
- level in school and appearance (tie)
- major

However, branches more frequently hire students from majors that their collections serve, and some supervisors will weigh such factors as work-study eligibility, GPA, and academic and extracurricular commitments. Furthermore, while **all supervisors use a job application, not all have job descriptions**; thirty per cent report no need for job descriptions due to high job demand. **Librarian involvement** in the hiring process is **much more prominent at the branch libraries**. (For a detailed analysis of results, see Appendix A; for supervisor suggestions on how to improve service skills of student employees, see Appendix B.)

2004 LibQUAL+

The second data source was drawn from comments from the 2004 LibQUAL+. The Committee isolated remarks referring to “staff” or “employee” service attitudes (Appendix C). Few comments mentioned students specifically, and ambiguity as to whether the remaining responses refer to student employee or to full-time staff reduces the accuracy of the information.

Comments directed at public service staff in general include:

- **seven mentions of poor service** attitude
- **two comments that the Libraries are not responsive** to problems or complaints

Those comments that referred to students specifically mentioned poor service attitudes and shortcomings in knowledge. It is noteworthy that two **comparisons were made between “adult staff” and “student staff”** (and also “librarians” and “students”), indicating a large perceived gap between the service received from students and from regular staff members. This dissatisfaction revealed the expectation of patrons that **students should be both as polite and as knowledgeable** about library services and the collection as permanent staff are.

Student Employee Questionnaire

A five-part questionnaire to solicit ideas on how to improve service quality was distributed to student employees during their annual appreciation party at Marston Science Library. Student assistants represented Marston Science Library Circulation, Marston Science Library Stack Maintenance, Library West Access Services Retrieval, the Map and Image Library, the Government Documents Department, and Interlibrary Loan.

Eager to share their work experiences and suggestions for improving student employee morale and library service, **students cited positive relationships** with

co-workers and supervisors, and **schedule flexibility**, as reasons they like their jobs. Monotony is noted as the overwhelmingly agreed-upon negative aspect of their work. Concerning this, **students favor more training**, more **job responsibilities** and more **specialized tasks**, and suggest cross training for a better understanding of library services outside of their general area. Some would like more **training guides** and **FAQ sheets** to refer to when questions arise.

While students feel they are valued members of the library organization, most would like to see more **appreciation** and **recognition days**. One student proposed creating UF Libraries "READ" posters featuring student employees.

Specifically referring to the improvement of service to patrons, students mention approachability issues, remarking that **employees should be more identifiable** to patrons and "be as friendly as possible" and "provide a more welcoming atmosphere." One student used the term "customer service" and advised that **service training be made a priority**. Some pointed out specific issues with library services that cause patron confusion and frustration, and that student employees encounter as the oftentimes **most visible faces of the library system**, such as problems with the new library management system, inconveniences associated with the renovation of Library West, and costs of photocopying in the Libraries. (For detailed comments from student employee questionnaires, see Appendix D)

Library Design Student Workshop feedback

As part of a larger retreat for design students in the UF College of Architecture, the Library Design Student Workshop was intended to address service quality as associated with the renovation of Library West, both in terms of human and spatial interaction. Addressing staff in general, the most **common request** made by student patrons was that **library staff should be more identifiable**, more **accessible** and more **approachable**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation of Uniform Guidelines for Student Employee Service Quality

Performance Guidelines for Public Service Student Employees

The Student Employee Service Quality Committee was charged with the creation of uniform guidelines for service quality that could **apply to all students working in public service locations**. Meant to be general and all-inclusive, encompassing students that worked in a range of positions from reference to circulation to stack maintenance, these guidelines had to incorporate both the main library and its branches, addressing the need for a **cohesive public service attitude among divisions**.

While the Committee realized that no existing document could be expansive enough to apply to all student positions within the Smathers Libraries, guidelines for reference service provision created by the American Library Association (ALA), the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and the University of Florida were thought to be apt templates for beginning to outline such policies.

RUSA guidelines note **"the term librarian ... applies to all who provide reference and informational services directly to library users"** (RUSA, 2004). The University of Florida does have some service points at which students provide reference service, but this is by no means the standard and it does not apply across departmental divisions. However, almost **all employees in publicly visible roles provide informational services**, including the student at the circulation desk who assists patrons in accessing course reserves, the retrieval student who teaches patrons how to access their library account, and the stack maintenance student who helps patrons find a call number on the shelf. There are currently **no clearly defined service expectations** that apply to these students.

While individual departments may emphasize public service as integral to job performance, there is **no universal, interdepartmental emphasis** on customer service attitude. Too often student employees, involved in the tasks of loaning and returning books, shelving, or doing more advanced technical work, do not realize that their **primary job responsibility** is to help the patron.

The greatest challenge in adapting existing guidelines into standards that would apply to the **multitude of student jobs** in the Smathers Libraries was that these guidelines are modeled on the reference interview, outlining the stages one would advance through in a reference transaction and defining the proper behavior for each of these stages. As noted earlier, students rarely work in positions that solely provide reference in a traditional sense, and the stages set forth by ALA and RUSA do not apply directly to all public service interactions.

Because the referral process is an essential part of a student's job, as is the provision of basic directional information, a decision was made to modify the categories of the UF and ALA guidelines. The categories ultimately chosen for the development of public service guidelines for student assistants were as follows:

- 1) **approachability**
- 2) **interest**
- 3) **listening/inquiring**
- 4) **information provision/referral**
- 5) **follow-up**

It is hoped that the heading "Information Provision" remains inclusive enough to cover both the student who tells a patron a due date after loaning an item, as well as the student providing reference service late at night or on a weekend, and that "Referral" helps to emphasize that referring a patron to the proper staff member or collection manager is just as valuable as providing a simple directional answer.

The appended **"Performance Guidelines for Public Service Student Employees"** (Appendix E) were **drafted by the Committee, reviewed by** a group of 29 **student supervisors**, and **revised** to their current form. They are intended to be **applicable to public service students** throughout the University of Florida library system, to **cover specific points of customer service attitude** that should be **addressed** during each student employee's **training period**.

Service Guidelines for Student Assistants

In the process of reviewing drafts of the initial performance guidelines, supervisors pointed out that **wording might be too technical** for new employees, and were concerned that the document would **not serve as a daily reference** for students if it were too detailed. In response to this, the Committee created a second,

more general guide, modeled on the University of Utah's "Service Guidelines for Reserve" (ARL, 1998).

This is a **clearer, more concise document** that should be **distributed to students** and **posted at workstations, summarizing** the full performance guidelines and **emphasizing** that our **primary responsibility is toward the patron**. As the full behavioral guidelines may be conceived of as an aid in the training of student assistants, to be used almost as a checklist, the shorter "**Service Guidelines for Student Assistants**" are not intended to replace them. Rather, they are meant to supplement them and make them **more accessible** to student employees. (See Appendix F for "Service Guidelines for Student Assistants.")

Both apply only to general public service; within each department, supervisors will **need to develop performance expectations for individual, departmental tasks**.

Cohesive Training of Student Employees

Public service seminar

Student assistants are regularly assigned to staff service desks and other public areas where **direct, repeated contact with patrons** is part of their job. But as the primary contact for their peers during many of the library's open hours, they are **seldom given formal training** in customer service skills. Lack of this training results in **poor service quality, patron dissatisfaction**, and consequently **low student employee morale**.

A **committee** should be **initiated to develop a library-wide public service seminar** for student assistants, to be held once per semester, that would **state the library's mission, emphasize public service** expectations, give an **explanation of the library's structure**, and impress upon **students** the important **role they play** as employees.

This is an important step in achieving the **Libraries' stated goal to provide uniformity of service** throughout library system. To overcome the **perceived gap in customer-service attitudes between student employees and full-time staff**, several universities have instituted similar orientations or seminars for their student employees. Central Missouri State University has successfully implemented a mandatory orientation program to ensure that student employees understand the workings of not just of their own departments, but also of the library system as a whole (Riley & Wales, 1997). The University of Kentucky has also acknowledged the need to extend customer service training to every level of library employment, and has made their public service seminar outline available in SPEC Kit No. 231 (ARL, 1998).

As Douglas Hasty states in "Student Assistants as Library Ambassadors: An Academic Library's Public Relations Initiative," "[Students] need instruction in basic customer service principles and specific library-service practices. Each student assistant must realize that his or her role in library services and public relations is crucial and is not overlooked" (2000).

Ideally, **this seminar**

- would be **mandatory**, even for returning students

- would be held **4-6 weeks after the start of the semester** to allow students time to familiarize themselves with the service experiences they may encounter
- would use **role-playing, games, and open dialogue** to create a program that both entertains and teaches
- would be **offered on several days** and times

Training guides & rubrics for individual departments

While library-wide training in customer service attitudes would be advantageous, **task-based training** should be **kept on the departmental level**, as the needs and goals of each department may not be the same, nor the tasks each supervisor teaches, nor their manner of teaching.

Therefore, to **balance** the need for **localized task training with a cohesive public service vision**, the establishment of **training rubrics**, that **clearly state departmental performance** expectations and illustrate specific criteria for meeting these, is needed.

Training through the use of rubrics is useful in the development of a cohesive training structure, while still allowing control over specific training tasks and goals up to individual department supervisors. **Training guides** and training rubrics can guide both supervisors and student employees during the training process:

- Supervisors will see a **distinct progress in each student's training**, as **defined criteria** will outline when a student has finished training in a particular area.
- The ability to **pass certain training tasks on to supervisory assistants** will be facilitated, while **ensuring that all trainees be held to a predetermined standard**.
- **Students** will **assume more responsibility** for their own rate of training, and can follow along a series of **clearly defined objectives**.

Based on the training system used at the University of Michigan (see Appendix G), Christine Driver developed a training rubric for stack maintenance students at Marston Science Library (see Appendix H). It establishes

- a **time frame** for students to learn each task, starting with date of hire
- primary **job responsibilities**
- **training methods** to be used in teaching those job duties
- the **behavioral** and/or **knowledge level** that a trained student **should exhibit**

A **workshop** on the general **creation of training guides** and **rubrics** would be necessary to achieve this goal.

Web-based training

To assist in the **training of tasks common to service points** throughout the Libraries, **web-based training modules** should be made available under a section of the **staff web dedicated to student assistants** and **student assistant training**. These could be based on those public tutorials offered online at <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/jgs/hand2.htm> and <http://www.library.health.ufl.edu/help/ufcatalog/home.htm#covered>, with considerations specific to the tasks

required of student employees. Current programs such as LCEasy are available in some departments, but not enough copies have been purchased to cover all.

Standardized training has been successful in providing students with a knowledge base before they begin their on-the-job training, and **assessment scores** can help supervisors focus their contact hours with trainees during the peak hours early in each semester.

Support for Student Employees

Expectations of student employees should meet the level required of regular staff, and their **training must support** this. Performance quality suffers when students are placed in roles in which patrons expect service that student assistants are not trained or authorized to provide. Training **student employees to fully function within their particular service** area would reduce patron frustration and improve service quality.

In fact, students have expressed a **strong desire to receive more training** and take on more **responsibility**. Unfortunately, some student assistants may also sense a **lack of teamwork**—within and between their departments—that can contribute to an **overall feeling of low morale** and **poor motivation**. Improvement efforts should focus on creating a **team-based approach** to the work environment among student assistants. By encouraging such an atmosphere, assistants will learn skills that are needed for future employment, foster an environment that encourages creativity, and better understand that they are **valued members of the library organization**.

Support for Supervisors of Student Employees

Flexibility at time-of-hire

To achieve the comprehensive training of student assistants and the development of proper training rubrics, all departments should consider the **priority given to public service training** as allowed in the job description of those supervisors of student employees. Since the **busiest times for orienting new or returning patrons** to the library obviously and unfortunately coincides with the busiest periods for training student assistants, a **redistribution of job duties assigned** to supervisors is needed at the start of each semester.

The **responsibility to hire, supervise, and train** is never the sole function of those supervising student employees; student assistant **supervisors** often **oversee circulation, stack maintenance, systems, and course reserves**. Additional, fixed considerations compete with the time dedicated to new student assistants in those students' first weeks of employment. Among them are the **realities of the registration and financial aid award processes** at the University. Also,

- Returning student assistants often do not know their hours of availability until the first weeks of the new semester. Interviewing, hiring, and scheduling are rarely possible to complete prior to the large arrival of library patrons at the start of the semester.
- FWS awards are not announced in a timeframe beneficial for more accurate budgeting of available OPS funds. Departments frequently must juggle the scheduling and budgeting of student assistants in those first weeks of the new

semester, often waiting to interview qualified student OPS candidates until after the pool of FWS applicants has been exhausted.

Workshops on the supervision of part-time employees

Because most supervisors report having received little or **no training in the supervision of student employees**, and because none report receiving any ongoing training in this area, **workshops** on supervising and training should be designed. These workshops should rely on speakers from both inside and outside of the University and Libraries, but ultimately should be **focused specifically on the supervision of part-time employees**. These workshops should be regular and required, as should **forums for group feedback** on issues relating to the supervision of student assistants.

Evaluating Student Employee Performance

Semester evaluation sheets & exit interviews

Student assistants need to know where they are succeeding and where their performance needs improvement. To this end, a **physical document with defined categories** (both general and specific to their department) and a **rating system** for each category should be added to their employment record. **Evaluation sheets** should be **drafted in coordination with training rubrics** and made **readily accessible** to students so that expectations are clear.

Just as valuable would be **exit interviews** as students graduate or leave the Libraries for further opportunities. Students would see their **strengths and weaknesses** in preparation for future employment, and supervisors would be able to collect **feedback on training practices, job retention factors, and work-related processes**.

Secret shopper program

A "**secret shopper**" program, where unidentified patrons would be sent to service points throughout the Libraries to **evaluate the level of service obtained**, is a customer-service tool recently adopted by academic libraries (Beile, 1997). Briefly, assigned library staff not familiar to student assistants in another unit would **report findings back to appropriate supervisors** for review. Evaluations such as these offer **effective and constructive suggestions for service improvement**, and could serve as the **groundwork for rewarding exemplary students** and departments.

Recognizing and Rewarding Student Employee Achievement

As with permanent staff, the **link between morale and productivity** is an important one—many student employees take pride in their jobs and want to feel that they are contributing to the success of the organization. In developing a **recognition program**, the SESQ Committee suggests **rewarding all student employees** through a **Libraries-wide appreciation party**, and **honoring one outstanding student** during that party with a scholarship, gift certificate, or their own "READ" poster.

A **variety of programs developed** to recognize and reward student assistants at peer institutions can serve **as effective models** for the UF Libraries. An Outstanding Student Assistant Recognition Award, such as that developed at Central Missouri State University, acknowledges a student assistant who demonstrates excellence in job performance, shows initiative and good judgment, and brings a strong work ethic to their job (Riley, 1997). **Students are nominated by their supervisors** to receive the award, and **library directors select** from this pool. The award winner receives a mention in the library newsletter and a gift card or other monetary award.

Meritorious student service is similarly publicized at Florida International University, with awards that include written appraisals by the library director to students' deans and advisors. Their award programs are popular and have been successful in making student assistants feel more valued (Hasty, 2000). The financial aid office at Southern Illinois University sponsors a \$200 scholarship program for student employees.

In order to specifically **recognize all student employees**, individual **supervisors should find frequent, low-cost ways** to make them feel valued. In polling student employees at the University of Florida, many suggested snacks and baked goods as rewards. Elsewhere, library departments have recognized their appreciation of student assistants with potlucks, barbeques and receptions, and certificates, buttons and goody bags. As happy and valued student workers are more productive and beneficial to the Libraries as a whole, **departmental discretionary funds** should be allotted to offset the costs incurred. Private or donor funds may be an additional way to underwrite such recognition programs.

Along this line, setting **student employee scholarships and awards** as a **library priority in strategic planning and development** improves the likelihood of finding a donor to fund such library projects. Since major resources at any university are dedicated toward scholarships, establishing these awards is consistent with university fund-raising priorities. And rewarding students may make sense from another perspective: the Evans Library at Texas A&M recently received a \$100,000 gift from a donor who had been a student employee 40 years ago.

IV. CONTINUANCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE GOALS FOR STUDENT ASSISTANTS

Anticipating the **changes faced by** the University of Florida Libraries with the opening of the **renovated Library West**, in terms of physical **service points to be staffed by student employees** and in terms of **new information sources** provided by the Libraries, the Committee proposes the following steps for both the **implementation of its recommendations** and for the **continuance of its overall goals**:

1. Create a **provisional committee charged to design a customer service seminar for new and returning student employees**. The committee will include librarians (from instruction and public service backgrounds), student supervisors, and student employees (or former students that now work for

the Libraries), and will aim to hold the first seminar near the start of the **Fall 2005 semester**.

2. Create a **temporary task force to collect student assistant hiring and training resources and post them to a central location on the staff webpage**. Librarians and supervisors who are familiar with web-based training tools and software will be included.
3. Establish a **standing team of supervisors who will meet to discuss issues pertaining to student employees and to implement further recommendations**. This will remain a **flexibly structured** group, encompassing **all of those who oversee students** and whose work involves any aspect of **public service**.

The team will **meet monthly** to discuss issues involving the work of student assistants, **moderated by either team members or those chosen from outside** of the team (department and unit heads or others, depending on the nature of the subject matter under discussion). **Smaller work groups will be selected by the team** and will be assigned to carry out specific recommendations and tasks. These will include those suggested in this report, such as:

- Discussion of student service quality in UF Libraries
- Customer service workshop
- Workshop on supervision of student employees
- Creating performance expectations for student service (including how to write rubrics and job descriptions)
- Web-based training resources (given by the task force once website completed)
- Creating a secret shopper program to gauge service quality
- Designing a student forum
- Evaluating students and creating evaluation forms
- Student awards (selection of a student)

This team will also provide **a forum to regularly address questions** specific to student employees, and to **communicate** and **solve future concerns on the service quality of student employees**.