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Mentor Where You Are:

Informal Mentoring of Student Workers

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Do you work with student workers in an academic library? Congratulations, you're a mentor! Do you work with volunteers in a public library? We suspect the same could be said for you. Do you work with students, volunteers, or aides in a school library? Yup, you're a mentor too.

While we may think of formalized programs and upper leadership positions when we hear the word “mentor,” the truth is that nearly every one of us has ample opportunity to be a mentor right in the position we currently hold. At Northwest Christian University (NCU) we have no formal mentorship program. “Mentor” does not appear anywhere in our institutional or library goals or outcomes. However, our interactions with library student workers, and the approach we take to supervising their work, involves an intentional degree of what could be termed informal mentoring. This approach is likely paralleled in many (probably all) of our college and university libraries across the state, and seen in various forms in all of our public, school, and other libraries.

What does informal mentoring look like? It will look different in every unique setting, of course. All we can do is describe some of what we do at NCU. Karen Head, public services supervisor, works most closely with our student workers. She has been a supervisor of student workers in the circulation department for almost twenty years. She has informally, but very intentionally, mentored over a hundred young workers. She sees it as a two way process, imparting her hard earned experience, wisdom and advice as they contribute fresh new perspectives and insights. We, as staff and students, mutually respect, care about, and encourage each other.

It is a growth process for us as staff as well. Karen believes she is a better mentor today than when she first started working with these young people. As she says:

“My first few groups of students liked me, but I’m not sure I put their best interests ahead of being liked and being popular with them. I gradually realized that they were better served by me if I placed their greater welfare and ultimate good over my desire to be liked. Today I address the tough stuff, giving them constructive advice and warning to counteract unproductive and unhealthy work habits. I am very intentional about



teaching and role modeling a productive work ethic. I focus on promptness, excellent customer service, good work habits, teamwork, diversity inclusion and positive attitudes that will help them prosper and thrive in their future careers. I encourage them to set work goals every year. We illustrate these goals and post them to remind us of what we are aiming for. Through building and maintaining respectful, friendly and close relationships we encourage and inspire each other to be better workers and better people.”

Mentoring is not a responsibility we take lightly. It involves patience, compassion and the understanding that everyone has their own pace in the process of incorporating learning into practice. But it feels good to be there for our student workers as a sounding board, as well as to offer encouragement and advice. Mentoring, even informally, provides mentors with a sense of usefulness and purpose. There is a definite aspect of “paying it forward,” in recognition of those in our lives who took the time and effort to advise, instruct and encourage us in our formative years.

It is very fulfilling to see these students persevere through four or five years of rigorous academic and life stresses, culminating in the joyous celebration of their academic and personal achievements at graduation! There are certainly taxing times that try our patience, wishing they could quickly acquire and put into practice, the wisdom we impart to them that has taken us years to accumulate and incorporate. But in the end it is worthwhile to be a witness to their personal growth as these young people persevere and triumph through the trials school and life throws at them.

It is also very gratifying when the students want to continue the relationship after graduation. It is fun to keep track of them on social media, to see their life progress as they pursue jobs and careers, travel, form new relationships, get married, have or adopt children, etc. Some will even come back and visit, which is a special delight. As one former student worker said to Karen:

“I think the library is a safe place for anyone to be and hang out, but I believe the staff are what make a library great. If people were to ask me who my mentor was, your name would come up in the conversation. I think it is important for every young adult to have someone they can go to and talk to about things. It created a comfortable environment, I think, for me to be at ease and just work well in the library. It creates a ‘happy place.’ The NCU library is my happy place, and you are my happy person.” (Morgan Horn).

It is especially gratifying to see student workers move on and do well in our own profession. Each of us in librarianship have our own stories about the way some positive experience in a library or with a librarian influenced our own career choice. As supervisors of student workers we have the opportunity to be that influential story in some student worker’s life.

There is no way to know in advance, of course, who those future librarians and library workers will be. Very few of them are thinking about librarianship this early in their careers. Of the many students we have collectively worked with over 20 years, only one has expressed interest at an undergraduate level in a career in librarianship, and that student is still in school (and still working for us), and is a story yet to unfold.

We have had students go on to work in libraries, and even to earn MLS degrees, and work as professional librarians. In every case these students’ later decisions to pursue library work have come as a mild surprise to those of us who worked with them while undergraduate students. It



has been an honor and a privilege to support their efforts, of course, by providing letters of reference to library schools and to employers, and by answering questions and providing advice to the former students themselves. We know many of you have similar stories of student workers, volunteers, or assistants who have gone on to become colleagues in one form or another.

By being more than merely a supervisor, and by treating our student workers as more than just a student worker, we like to believe that we have contributed to the success these former students now enjoy in our own profession. Through our actions, words, and decisions, we exemplify the positive values and worth of librarianship to student workers. When we explain the ‘why’s’ of work assigned to students, or help them understand how their tasks fit into the overall mission of the library, we help our students gain an appreciation of the important work we do, and that they might do in the future. When we share reasons for decisions, and have discussions about theory and practice, we instill library values in our student workers, whether they go on to work in libraries or not. In the words of some former student workers now working in libraries:

“My initial reaction to librarianship was, “That’s too predictably uncool for a girl labeled ‘bookworm’ all through her formative years.” My year as a student worker, however, opened my eyes to how subversive and cool librarians actually were.” (Jenny Gapp, Portland Public Schools; Oregon City Public Library).

“So as far as mentoring goes, I feel that the most important part was in helping me see what strengths I possessed that I wasn’t even aware of. The other great thing about being mentored as a freshman was just the chance to explore.” (Kelsey Sutton, Tillamook County Library).

“I’m forever grateful for (the library) trusting someone as young as myself with a variety of challenging and essential tasks and projects. If (they) had not given me the confidence and willingness to take on new tasks and learn new skills, I may never have applied for (my current position). Mentorship is essential to libraries and librarians of the future, and I only hope I can find myself filling the same role someday.” (Katlyn Temple, Chetco Community Public Library).

Obviously not every student worker is open to discussions about theory or cares to know how their work fits into the overall goals of the library. When we stress to all of our student workers that they are an integral and important part of our team, engage them in the full process of providing quality library services and resources, and develop a work culture of trust and mutual respect; then those that may not be considering library work have a positive foundation and perspective, if and when that career option opens for them in the future.

Wherever our students end up in the future, the opportunity to have been a part of their maturation and growth is a real joy. Each of their journeys is unique, and some come with more bumps, detours, and roadblocks than others. But each one can benefit from a little intentional informal mentoring while our journeys intersect for a short while. Even though we have no formal mentoring program in our library, the intentional informal mentoring we do reaps great benefits for our student workers, for us as staff, and for our library. Wherever your informal mentoring opportunities exist, we hope you enjoy the same rewards. 

