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Re-Engaging/Engaging Part-time Librarians

Wilma L. Jones

ABSTRACT

In order to maintain high quality service and strengthen retention of part-time librarians, this

article addresses ways of engaging new part-time librarians and re-engaging long-time part-time

librarians. Part-time librarians are hired primarily to work hours outside the traditional work

week or as temporary replacements for unanticipated vacancies, yet they end up providing a third

of the service, solely, during evenings and weekends in most small to mid-sized academic

institutions. Most are brought in with very little training or orientation to the institution and are

expected to hit the ground running while maintaining quality service. This article provides

managers with suggestions to better integrate part-time librarians into fabric of the institution.

Keywords: part-time librarians; college and university libraries; in-service-education;
personnel/administration; training and orientation; retention

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Introduction

Part-time librarians are increasingly becoming an invaluable part of the workforce fabric of many libraries in the twenty-first century. Due to financial constraints and the need for expanded high skill level services, managers of libraries have had to increase their part-time professional staff to meet the demands of new services. Feldman and Doerpinghaus (1992) note four reasons for greater numbers of part-time workers in organizations: support for expanding hours of service, scheduling complexities, lower labor costs, and the quickest way to expand labor in response to an improved economy. Indeed, most institutions of higher learning have seen a significant increase in part-time instructional faculty, from 22% in 1970 to 48% in 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics 2008, Table 248); however, there is no comparable data that documents that the same phenomenon taking place in academic libraries today. Nevertheless, Maatta (2003, 2007, 2009), who has published several articles about the placement of recent MLS graduates, notes a steady increase in part-time employment of new graduates from 12.6% in 2002 to 18.3% in 2008.

Academic librarians often take great pride in offering high quality service to our patrons. Our common mantra: No patron walks away with nothing. When in doubt or stumped, there is always another librarian to consult with, and if nothing can be retrieved for the patron, a referral to another institution that will better serve the patron is offered. Part-time librarians in small to mid-sized academic libraries often work alone as the sole professionals in the library during their shift. In addition, they serve patrons who may never interact with the full-time staff. Thus, this article aims to provide managers with tips on better integrating part-time librarians into the institution through orientations, communications, projects and activities, forums, and non-financial rewards.

While the optimal goal may be to employ full-time librarians only in order to ensure stability and sustain quality of service, the hiring of part-time librarians allows for flexible scheduling. Most institutions hire part-time librarians to work the extended hours of late evenings and during weekends. The few who are hired to work during weekdays are also found to be invaluable in that they serve as backup for full-time librarians who provide instruction sessions, attend committee meetings, or are on research or family leave.

Orientation to a library's resources, services, and facilities for the newly hired as well as on-going training for all part-time librarians is a key factor in sustaining the library's quality of service in support of the institution's mission and values. Training is critical as in most cases part-time librarians are hired in a rush to fill unexpected vacancies; while many turn out to be the perfect fit, others are not just quite the right fit for the institution. While some may have had experiences with a similar institution, others may not have been so fortunate and often need to adjust to a steep learning curve having either no experience as recent graduates or totally different experiences. Those part-time librarians who report for work after an eight- or nine-hour workday may provide evening patrons with service that can sometimes lack enthusiasm or be of poor quality. Yet, there are also those part-time librarians who are just perfect, needing any encouragement or motivation; however, they may find themselves working in an unchallenging environment and are already thinking of applying to another institution that may provide them with greater stimulation. Thus, integrating part-time librarians more fully into library operations can be critical for the provision of quality service.

Orientation for new part-time librarians:

Of greatest importance is an orientation to not only the reference desk area in which librarians primarily work but also to the various service points available. Walking through these areas and meeting staff in these areas will help them remember whom to call on if and when needed. In addition to this library-specific orientation, institutional information should be provided, starting with critical units such as Public Safety and the Physical Plant. A comprehensive orientation could include:

- an overview of the print and electronic ready reference tools, such as the library's hours of service in all areas; library directory, vertical file or wiki, and the three-most-requested telephone numbers or questions.

- orientation to the various service points and stack areas, including reference, special collections, periodicals, audiovisuals, circulating collections, and other non-circulating collections. It is helpful to give reasons why certain collections were placed in their current locations.

- orientation to other service points in the library, including cataloguing, media services, archives, special collections, computer labs, rare book room, etc. In addition, if possible, introduce adjuncts to the staff in these areas during their working hours.

- library handbook or manual that will provide in-depth details about resources, services, and facilities of the library. This is particularly valuable to have in print or online for new and veteran librarians to consult regarding infrequently requested resources.

- overview of the institution's mission and vision should be provided to all new part-time librarians. They should also be encouraged to regularly review the institution's Website to become familiar with its curriculum, services, facilities, and partners.

Communicating with all part-time librarians

Communication is a priority that managers should work on continually. In cases where the supervisor rarely has the opportunity to meet with the part-time professional face-to-face, the following may be appropriate:

- Make available a simple orientation manual/handbook in a variety of formats so that information needed may be accessed via the preferred mode, e.g. print manual, a pdf version of the manual, a wiki, or whatever the latest appropriate technology format may be. This manual will include information on policies, procedures, and other pertinent information mentioned in the orientation section for new part-time librarians. This manual will also be useful for newly hired full-time staff and support staff.

- If possible, the supervisor should maintain an open door policy for personal access and also via other modes of access, such as E-mail, home telephone, mobile telephone, etc. This is most helpful in cases of personal crisis or emergencies handling a difficult situation in the library.

- When a library employs more than one part-time librarian, it may be helpful to give all part-time staff, as well as the supervisor, access to the current semester's schedule of part-time librarians, and create a sub-directory of preferred E-mails and telephone numbers for each part-time librarian. This should foster a more collegial work environment in which co-workers may use these avenues to network and swap schedules, as well as for other work related matters.

- Keep part-time librarians apprised of issues of the day, new policies, upcoming events, and other activities that may affect service. This can be done via E-mail, a log book, bulletin board, reference wiki, etc. This should be a two-way street in that part-time

librarians must also be encouraged to inform their supervisor or peers of new, developing, or puzzling matters.

- Provide part-time librarians with minutes from department monthly meetings, ad-hoc meetings, and significant correspondence from the institution's leaders. This will give them a sense of current and future activities taking place in various units of the department and in the institution. Providing minutes gives part-time staff a sense of belonging to the department, and it keeps them apprised of the library's short- and long-term goals and initiatives.

- Develop a feedback mechanism to offer the opportunity for providing input and sharing experiences. This could be done through brief monthly meetings with one's supervisor or via E-mail with specific questions.

Projects and Activities

A great way to get all part-timers engaged is to offer or solicit projects or activities in which they choose to participate. Playing to one's strength will always work to the benefit of the library. The main objective is to develop and foster projects that will contribute to the library's development and bring recognition to staff for the contribution they have made. Examples of such activities and projects include:

- collection development. Since part-time librarians work with a population whom the full-time librarians may never encounter, their input for collection development is important. This can be done through a daily log of requests for material not available in the library, including lost and missing titles. Subject bibliographers could be encouraged

to reach out to the part-time librarians and learn of recurring needs of evening and weekend students.

- library publications. Seeking participation in activities such as articles for the newsletter, print and Web research guides, flyers, Web pages, online exhibits, or promotional posters can be beneficial for both library users and part-time staff. These activities add to the development of the library and give part-time librarians the opportunity to be more intimately involved with the collections and services provided.

- the development or design of new programs and services. Prior to launching a new program or service, part-time librarians should be encouraged to evaluate a preview, trial, or dry-run. Their perspectives, whether they have been at your institution for one week or fifteen years, may warrant changes before the formal launch date. The part-time librarians who currently work full-time elsewhere often make substantive contributions if they have already experienced the forthcoming new program or service.

- the development or renovation of the facility. In creating new spaces or renovating underutilized spaces in the library, many library staff members, including part-time librarians, need to be consulted regarding the behavior of patrons who use or will be using these spaces. This will provide the architects with the pertinent information needed to construct and enhance these spaces.

Professional Development

   As we settle into the twenty-first century, where most communication is done electronically, some form of face-to-face communication remains critical especially in the areas of guidance and professional development. As a consequence of the use of advanced technologies, many

part-time librarians will never cross paths with their supervisors after being hired. Yet, to ensure that quality of service is maintained, observations of their service should be performed and expectations should be clarified. Furthermore, where participation in professional development is valued by academic institutions for the success of its full-time faculty and staff, this criteria must also be communicated to the part-time librarians.   Nevertheless, when possible, it is important to provide opportunities for part-time librarians, new graduates as well as veterans, to gain professional development. Some suggestions are as follows:

- When possible, supervisors of part-time librarians should arrange for a face-to-face meeting with them for both performance evaluation or other occasions when needed. Sharing pertinent information that clarifies the library's policies and/or procedures will result in greater understanding and lead to the provision of more effective service. The American Library Association's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals* will likely be of considerable value.

- Organize annual or semi-annual meetings for part-time librarians. These meetings are helpful for many reasons, such as meeting other part-time librarians, sharing and exchanging ideas.

- Organize annual or semi-annual in-service peer-to-peer professional development sessions. This activity ties into the preceding item. While part-time librarians are expected to be familiar with all resources and services provided by a library, providing time for professional development can be valuable in many unexpected ways. These professional development sessions give everyone an opportunity to discuss new and current resources, technologies, or services. Topics could include: reference and instruction policies, the intricacies of a new interface to a particular database, discussion

of new and emerging technologies, the adoption or integration of new software and hardware (e.g., adaptive technology for students with disabilities, courseware management tools, scanning workstation, self-checkout workstations, etc). These sessions could be half-day or full-day sessions during intersession or on a weekend day that is convenient for all.

- Offer a mentoring program that pairs a recently-graduated librarian with an experienced full-time librarian.
- Encourage part-time librarians to tap into opportunities offered by the institution for professional development.

Rewards/Incentives with no financial strings

It is often the little gestures that may put a spring in the steps of a veteran part-time librarian or make a newly hired part-time librarian feel embraced by the institution. While rewards for significant contributions may not be financially possible, acknowledging part-time librarians can be done in the following ways:

- Include their names and ranks among the list of librarians on print and Web publications, where possible. This could include the library's homepage, annual reports, brochures, etc.
- Remind them to provide a dated copy of publications and projects that they create for the library for inclusion in their personnel file. Documentation of these activities is necessary for promotion, where applicable, and helpful to new graduates seeking full-time positions.
- Ask for their opinions in matters of services that they provide. However, remember to provide them with feedback of the final decision.

- Give credit where credit is due. Mention their contributions at department meetings and programs, when possible, so that the event may be recorded.

- Send all part-time librarians invitations to campus events such as literary events, convocation, graduation, town hall meetings, holiday parties, barbeques, and sports tournaments for staff. Attending these events will provide them with additional knowledge about the culture of the institution.

- Nominate part-time librarians who deserve to be recognized in awards given by the institution.

Conclusion

All of the suggestions mentioned above will serve to engage part-time librarians who are new to an institution, but especially those new to librarianship. They are also meant to motivate and re-engage long-time part-timers who may need some encouragement to revitalize their methods of providing service. These suggestions should also benefit supervisors by enabling them to become better managers. Ultimately, it is library users who will benefit most from the enhanced services that part-time librarians will be able to provide.

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