

Conducting a SWOT Analysis: Evaluating the Student Employee Program in Archives and Special Collections at New Mexico State University

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Abstract

Student employees within an Archives and Special Collections department support the public service and collection management responsibilities at many academic libraries. What tools can be used to evaluate a student employee program from within the department? Can utilizing a business management tool work within a library department? This paper outlines the steps taken to conduct a SWOT Analysis to evaluate the student employee program, and the outcomes and recommendation, at New Mexico State University Archives and Special Collections Department. While the focus is on a selected department within an academic library, the principals could be applied in any areas of the library where students are employed.

Keywords: Student employees, SWOT Analysis, Academic libraries, Archives, Special Collections

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In November of 2015, the Archives and Special Collections Department Head at New Mexico State University created a departmental work group to revise the student employee training manual. Several long-term student employees were graduating, necessitating new hires. Additionally, the student training manual had not been updated since 2008 and there was a need to evaluate the current student employee program. The work group, comprised of the Special Collections Librarian, the student supervisor and the back-up student supervisor utilized a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to develop recommendations for improving the student employee program.

Background

Over the course of an academic school year, NMSU Archives and Special Collections employs between five and nine student employees. The department is comprised of five units each with a unit head: Political Papers Collection, Reprographics, Rio Grande Historical Collections (RGHC), Special Collections, and University Archives.

While there are some tasks for which all student employees within the department are responsible, such as reproductions and retrievals, each unit is assigned one to two student employees to perform tasks that are more specific to the needs of the unit. For example, student employees in Special Collections process new material, whereas RGHC student employees create container lists for unprocessed collections.

Before November of 2015, student employees were under the supervision of a paraprofessional staff member. This position, the student supervisor, was responsible for hiring, scheduling, and any HR requirements related to student employees. Additionally, the student supervisor was responsible for training regarding departmental tasks and overseeing all disciplinary actions. After the SWOT analysis was completed and the work group submitted their report to the department head, unit heads assumed responsibility for training and supervising student employees' work within their unit, and open communication was encouraged among unit heads, student supervisor, and student employees.

Literature Review

In September of 2015, a University standing committee was reevaluating its mission, goals and value as a committee. The chair, along with a representative from the College of Business, decided to conduct a SWOT analysis with the members of the committee. Albert S. Humphrey has been credited for the development of the SWOT Analysis. In the newsletter for the *SRI Alumni Association* (2005), an abridged version of Humphrey's paper, *SWOT Analysis for Management Consulting*, was published outlining the areas of the SWOT Analysis that he used for more than 35 years. This management tool was a product of research conducted at the then Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) between 1960 and 1970. The research was funded by Fortune 500 companies to develop a new system for managing change. According to Humphrey, the original acronym was S-O-F-T: Satisfactory, Opportunities, Fault, and Threat. Over time it became SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (p. 7-8).

Simoneaux and Stroud (2011) assert that a key advantage of the SWOT process is the promotion of proactive thinking and planning vs. reactive decision-making (p.75). As information technology improves, libraries need to adapt quickly and nimbly. Simoneaux and Stroud discuss the effectiveness of a SWOT analysis as a "tool for managing change, determining strategic direction, and setting realistic goals and objectives (p.78)." This process could be adapted from a business setting to a library.

Fernandez (2009) outlines how libraries could use a SWOT analysis for social media initiatives. "A SWOT analysis of social media in libraries will give libraries the opportunity to use such media to develop a dynamic relationship between themselves and their users (p. 36)." Additionally, the article outlines the four areas of the analysis with social media as the subject. It addresses key points in each area to help the facilitator of the analysis

solicit comments. Using this model, the committee chair substituted the term “student employee program” for “social media” and conducted the analysis.

NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections SWOT Analysis

The chair provided members of the work group with an introduction to SWOT analysis asking them to focus on the student employee program. The goal was to evaluate what the department was doing well and what may need improvement. The work group was asked to think about the ideal student employee program and what steps the department could take to realize this ideal. Each member, including the chair, contributed to the activity, which started with the strengths, or the “what we have been doing well” category.

Strengths

The literature regarding SWOT analysis suggested starting with a discussion about strengths, focusing on what your organization has done well. For NMSU Archives and Special Collections, the work group identified the length of time the student employees work in the department. The nature of the department, namely its unique material, allowed student employees to work in a specialized environment, promoting a sense of being part of a team. Furthermore, the work group discussed that employment of student employees freed up staff time to focus on other projects.

Weaknesses

While it was challenging to identify and acknowledge weaknesses within the student employee program, the work group openly discussed problems that the department had faced over the last couple of years. A lack of policies or procedures pertaining to the role of unit heads with regard to student employees led to uncertainty and decreased productivity. Members of the work group stated that there was a lack of checks and balances with student employees leading to miscommunication and neglected projects. The work group further noted that they felt the student employees did not understand the role or purpose of an archives and special collections department,

including a key understanding of policies and procedures regarding security. The flexibility of scheduling for student employees, which was cited as a strength, was also cited as a weakness, as it placed restrictions on departmental staff regarding the availability of student employee assistance during work hours.

Most of the weaknesses identified during the SWOT analysis pertained to the student employees, communication, and the need for policies and procedures, but the work group also recognized that the structure of the department, both physically and organizationally, had created silos. In particular, being physically located on three different floors and a subsequent lack of communication limited cooperation regarding the student employee program. These were mentioned as weaknesses that could be improved upon in the future.

Opportunities

The work group approached this section with optimism. Building upon the strengths, the work group began considering external factors that could contribute to the department's success. The work group discussed ideas to improve the department's public services, using technology to improve communication, developing a more robust student employee program, and educating student employees on the mission, role, and function of an archives and special collections department. To achieve these goals, the work group defined specific areas to address: refining retrieval process of material for patrons, staffing the reference desk with student employees, creating a tiered structure for student employee positions, and developing graduate internships.

Threats

Much like the 'weaknesses' section, beginning a discussion about threats was difficult. Defining 'threats' as potential problems or risks caused by external factors helped to guide the conversation. The group focused on student employees' lack of understanding regarding security policies and procedures, which could lead to theft or damage to material, and how the absence of consistent standards and expectations for student employees could affect the completion of projects. Lastly, the increase of complaints from patrons regarding the department's public service due to the difficulty of locating student employees to retrieve material was identified as a threat and concern by the work group.

Conclusion

As the work group completed the analysis, a discussion took place about the role of the unit heads within the student employee program. Because some of the weaknesses seemed to result from lack of transparency with regard to the role of a unit head with student employees, the work group decided to meet with each unit. Since unit heads were a vital part of the student employee program, four discussion questions were developed by the work group and distributed to the units. The meetings were helpful in identifying the specific needs of each unit and areas of improvement within the department. Many of the ideas, comments, and expectations were used in developing the recommendations for improving the student employee program. The questions and the responses can be found in the appendix.

Recommendations

The recommendations were developed from the SWOT analysis, unit meetings, and members of the work group. There were three areas of focus: student employee management, communication, and training. Each area provided methods for improvement and/or change to the student employee program. While the recommendations were submitted to the department head for review, it was stated that if the department wished to move forward with any of these, compliance within the rules, regulations, and guidelines regarding student employment at NMSU would need to be followed.

Student Employees Management

To help manage student employees, the work group recommended that the department develop consistent standards and expectation of student employees, in consultation with current standards provided by university policy pertaining to student employees and with an understanding of the library and the staff's role as educators. Student employees are students first, and university employees have a responsibility as educators to help students develop "soft skills" and prepare them for the workforce. Standards and expectations could help with training, provide the educational component mentioned, and assist in setting achievable goals for student employees.

Student employee management within the department was not clear to many of the unit heads. There was a student supervisor, but projects were supervised by the unit heads for which the student employees were assigned. The units suggested developing a policy regarding the authority, oversight and direction unit heads should have regarding student employees. They recommended that the policy should detail the day-to-day responsibility of the student supervisor and the unit heads. For example, where does the responsibility lie when comments regarding the level of socializing among the students has increased? Would this be the student supervisor or the unit head? Clear understanding in this area would increase student employees' productivity and contribute to the department goal of providing access and public service.

Additionally, the work group recommended exploring the possibility of a tiered student position structure. New student employees would start as a Student Aide 1. As the student progressed through school and assumed more responsibilities within the department, they would be 'promoted' to Student Aide 2. The development of this structure opened the possibility that Student Aide 2's could train new student employees, sit on the reference desk in the reading room, and provide minimal level reference.

Communication

The second area of focus for the recommendation was the overall need to improve communication among the departmental staff regarding student employees. This included the student supervisor, unit heads, and student employees. There was a need for better dialogue regarding absences, changes in schedules and work load. The work group suggested that improving communication in these areas could improve departmental workflows and public service.

Additionally, improvement in communication between the student supervisor and the unit heads was needed. This included scheduling, training, identifying departmental projects needing student employees' assistance, specifying student employee daily duties in the unit and within the department. Ongoing dialogue between the student supervisor and the unit heads could improve overall departmental communication and productivity.

The work group recommended that student employees should be required to contact both the student supervisor and the unit head with any type of scheduling issues. This was not the process at the time and important information was lost or not communicated. Through training

and guidance student employees should improve their communication with the unit head they are working under.

To improve communication between the student supervisor, unit heads, and students, the work group provided many recommendations. The first was the development of a departmental blog to centralize student employee projects and schedules and to communicate within the department. The second was to develop a prioritized list of daily duties for student employees. An example for the department would be duplication orders and returns. For one of the units, it could be shelving archival and/or special collection materials, or shelf reading material in Special Collections and RGHC. Finally, the work group wanted to provide options for the department to improve communication and suggested weekly or monthly reports from student employees submitted to both the student supervisor and unit head.

While communication between the student supervisor, unit heads, and student employees was a topic of conversation during this process, one major concern was the lack of communication, access, and reliability with student employees and retrieval of material for patron use. Public service to walk-in patrons had been affected by the amount of time it took to locate a student employee. Many issues stemmed from the disbursement of the units across three floors of the library; however, student employees who were on the retrieval schedule could not be located, either by phone or in person.

The work group recommended the use of a communications device, such as an Apple iTouch, to improve retrieval times and more importantly, improve communication. Additionally, it was recommended that the departmental Google account be used to GChat with the iTouch. For example, a staff member on the reference desk could use the desktop Google chat window, to provide a straightforward, cut and paste set of information from either the library catalog, archival finding aids or the patron database. This process could eliminate the chance for errors in location information and served as a way for student employees to ask questions while retrieving material.

Training

The final area of focus was on student employee training. At the time training of administrative and department responsibilities of the student employees such as using the time clock, duplication orders, returns and the retrieval schedule was conducted by the student supervisor. It was unclear where the responsibility of training within the

unit lay. It was also not communicated when training of a student employee was to commence.

The work group recommended that training of administrative and department responsibilities should continue to be the responsibility of the student supervisor. Training within each unit should be the responsibility of the unit head, including student employees assigned to that unit and any cross-training needed. Additionally, to improve the communication, it was recommended that a training schedule be created when a new hire arrived in the department and that the student supervisor work directly with the unit head to facilitate a smooth transition for training.

Another recommendation was to establish cross-training of student employees to do minimal level duties within all the units. This would require involvement from the unit heads; it would be his or her role to provide minimal level duties that could be completed by any student employees, along with the responsibility to provide training for these duties. Some examples that were discussed in the unit meetings were retrievals, re-shelving and shelf reading in both archives and special collections, processing books, shifting, and basic preservation across all units.

Overall, training of student employees within the units was not an issue. However, it did create the silo effect that was mentioned during the unit meetings. To overcome this issue, the work group recommended that there be a general overview of the department and information session regarding the different units to all new and current student employees. Additionally, it was clear from the unit meetings that many of the current student employees did not understand the role, mission, or value of an Archives and Special Collections department. The student supervisor provided a general walk-through of the department and the only time a student employee would be on a different floor than his or her assigned unit, would be during a retrieval. The work group recommended that the walk-through of the department continue and a more formal orientation be developed that included departmental history, how collections are organized, the history of why we do what we do, basic preservation, and an understanding and correct approach to security and security procedures. It was also recommended that the student supervisor work with the department head and unit heads to develop this orientation.

Recommendations were also made to develop information sessions with the different units. These sessions could be provided by the unit head for all student employees. Such a session could help with cross-training and develop a student employee's understanding of the department as a whole. Additionally, this could also achieve the recommendation of providing an educational component to training and supervising our student employees. Furthermore, it was recommended that these information sessions should

be a scheduled meeting and a requirement of training for all student employees. The work group stated that this should start with a discussion between the student supervisor and the unit head to best facilitate timing. While this recommendation could be seen as redundant, and maybe similar to the general orientation to the department, these sessions should be more focused on the individual units.

Outcomes

A report of the recommendations was submitted for review. Overall, the department head was satisfied with the work that was completed and suggested that a departmental meeting be scheduled to further discuss the recommendations and to gain additional input. At the meeting, the department agreed to develop a policy and procedure regarding the authority, oversight and direction unit heads have regarding student employees. Once this was implemented, unit heads had a strong understanding of their role in managing student employees, which increased productivity of projects within the department. Some units, while this was not a department wide accepted recommendation, developed standards and expectations for student employees. To improve communication, the department agreed on the use of a communications device, such as an Apple iTouch, and a department overview and unit information sessions to be incorporated into the student employee training.

At the start of 2016, the implementation of the iTouch had resulted in great improvement in public service. Average retrieval time was between ten to fifteen minutes, whereas before the SWOT analysis, retrieval time could take up to twenty minutes or more to provide access to material. Overall communication improved throughout the department. Student employees became more involved within, and were seen as members of, the department. The division between the units had softened and there was more collaboration on projects, ideas, and student employee involvement.

In February 2016, after the report was reviewed and implementation of recommendations were taking place, the student supervisor responsibilities were reassigned to another paraprofessional. The following academic semester, the new student supervisor developed a more focused student employee program. The student supervisor developed and communicated expectations of work ethics to the student employees. There was a clear directive to commit to a schedule as assigned, communicated with members of assigned units, and to be productive. Also, the student supervisor began to communicate with the unit head more frequently. The unit heads were made aware of changes in schedules, absences, and the need

for training. Additionally, unit heads participated in basic cross-training and information session pertaining to his or her unit, which was facilitated during an orientation, developed by the student supervisor, for all current and new student employees.

While not all the recommendations were implemented, the report sparked conversations regarding the future of the student employee program. Using the SWOT analysis allowed the work group to think critically about the current student training program, in addition to thinking outside the box and improving our services and department. Certain recommendations could not be implemented at the time due to elements outside the control of the department and library. However, this exercise allowed the work group to evaluate the current state of the NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections student employee program.

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Appendix

The questions and responses from the meeting with the unit heads.

1: *What do you as a unit need from all student employees and what do you expect from all students?*

Need:

- » Reliable and follow directions in a timely manner. Come with questions early in the process of doing their job
- » Attention to detail
- » All students should be able to retrieve anything with little help from unit head.
- » Being able to recognize other library employees
- » Workflow for arrival of student employees
- » Communication with students during their time at work
- » Communication about retrievals, if taking too long contact the desk to let them know

Expect:

- » Professional level of involvement
- » Socializing kept to a minimum
- » Punctuality
- » Follow set rules regarding the use of university computers while at work
- » Expect them to work independently and with little supervision.
- » Complete projects in a timely manner

2: Do you have standards and expectations for student employees within your unit? Should there be?

There is a need in general for standards and expectations of student employees

- » Stick to schedule, call when sick or out of the office, follow rules
- » If you do not have something to do ask

3: What do we need as a department from our student employees and as a department what do we want students to do?

Need:

- » Students for Retrievals
- » Communication about retrievals, if taking too long contact the desk to let them know
- » Accessing students to do the retrievals, without the pager, is harder to get a hold of students on the fourth floor, harder to retrieve materials Friday afternoon and during lunch hours
- » Preliminary inventory of archival collections, everyday library duties, shelf reading
- » Rehousing, preservation photocopying
- » Student employee who is not a senior, looking for sophomores and/or junior
- » Someone who is sharp and a quick learner

Want:

- » Student daily duties: within the units and within the departments
- » Rotating students throughout the units-maybe with students who want to do it
- » Trained students within the unit could train others from different units
- » Tiered student assistants

- » If students are interested in going after a library degree, giving them the broadest experience within the department

4: *What do you think your role is with our student employees?*

- » Training students
- » Overseeing projects
- » Participation in evaluation
- » Supervisor their work in the unit and set projects
- » General work supervisor
- » Introduce them into the world of archives
- » Educational role

Additional ideas came up during the discussion that were not completely related to the direct question.

- » Cross-training on basic duties throughout the units
- » Orientation on units conducted by the unit head
- » Project pool
- » Tracking students projects, use of a blog or Google Doc, OneDrive
- » More training in other units
- » How collections are organized, back history of why we do what we do
- » Understanding and correct approach to security
- » Communication from student employees to student supervisor and unit heads
- » Student employees on the swipe card system
- » Student Employees having lanyards to identify them as members of the department

- » Something that is not the pager for contacting students for retrievals
- » A way to see what gets put back on the shelf as a part of security
- » Long term goal, senior students serving on the reference desk

Idea of cross-training was mentioned and a follow up question was asked.

What can students do in each unit?

- » Retrievals and reshelving in both archives and special collections
- » Copying
- » Processing books
- » Shelf reading in both archives and special collections
- » Preliminary inventories
- » Shifting
- » Rehousing materials, basic preservation
- » Basic preservation training as a whole, more specific preservation by the unit level