

LOYAL TO A PLACE: DEVELOPING STAFF AS LIBRARIANS

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Recruiting and retaining librarians by exploring the uniqueness of Indiana as a “place” is an innovative and exciting concept. In addition, why not explore the concept of recruiting individuals that have already chosen Indiana as “their place?” Many talented and motivated individuals already staff Indiana’s libraries. If recruitment efforts are focused on developing existing staff members, libraries are likely to be rewarded with professionals that are already loyal to their state, their library, “their place.” The success of this approach in a mid-size public library in Indiana will be explored.

Several times in the recent past, the Vigo County Public Library in Terre Haute, IN, has experienced difficulty in recruiting librarians to fill existing openings. A repeated lack of qualified applicants led VCPL to consider alternative recruitment options. The administration hit upon the idea of evaluating their own support staff, seeking employees that might have the potential to fill existing openings, even if they did not have the appropriate advanced degrees. These motivated staff members were approached with a proposition: they would be given the opportunity to tackle the responsibilities and challenges of librarians’ positions with the title of associate librarians, with the understanding that they would return to school to pursue advanced degrees in library and information science. Upon completion of their degree programs, they would continue in their positions and their accomplishments would be rewarded with the title, salary, and prestige accorded fully accredited librarians.

As many of us working in libraries know, it is often difficult to properly compensate staff members for their hard work and dedication. There is little money available for raises, particularly for support staff. Entrusting quality support staff with the responsibilities of librarians and encouraging them to pursue advanced degrees provides administrators an opportunity to recognize and reward exceptional support staff with both the respect and the salary they deserve. This option also steers support staff toward one of the few paths to advancement within the library. The library itself also

benefits from this process. Instead of searching for outside talent that may or may not be loyal to the area or the library, this method helps to guarantee that new librarians are dedicated to their library and their locale. Ultimately, the staff, the librarians, the administrators, and the library will all benefit from the promotion and retention of those people who are already attached to the institution.

Going back to school while working can be quite challenging, particularly if a simultaneous promotion to a new position as an associate librarian is also involved. Administrators must remember to allow flexible scheduling in order to ensure that classes are attended and assignments are completed. VCPL has allowed staff various scheduling possibilities, including the option to work fewer hours while classes are in session or the option to work nights or weekends to make up for regular work time missed due to class schedules.

Support from co-workers can have a tremendous influence on your staff members who are pursuing advanced degrees. Regardless of whether the support comes in the form of on the job mentoring, schedule swapping, or help with homework, students should know that they can turn to their colleagues for assistance. Support might even come in some very unexpected forms. VCPL’s staff has held several successful fundraisers to help supplement the Staff Association’s Scholarship Fund so that additional opportunities would be available to their co-workers. Our library wide cook-off fundraisers, with blue ribbons and much notoriety going to the winners, are successful, popular, and fun.

In addition to identifying staff for promotion, it is vital to continue to recognize these new librarians and nurture their professional development after they have completed their degrees. A positive atmosphere will encourage happiness and loyalty and, as a result, aid in retention. Providing continuing education opportunities and sponsoring conference participation will go a long way towards helping your new professionals evolve into competent and confident librarians. It is important to note that offering such development

opportunities to all professionals, new or otherwise, will enhance creativity, enthusiasm and retention. VCPL endorses participation in the Indiana Library Federation and supports, when possible, participation in additional professional organizations and conferences. Continuing education requests, via such avenues as the INCOLSA classes, are also sanctioned by the administration.

Over the years, VCPL has successfully guided no less than twenty staff members through masters of library and information science programs and into professional positions. Most of our new professionals were former support staff members that had been at the library and in the area for many years. They are dedicated to "their place" and loyal to their library. VCPL is excited to report that an additional seven staff members are pursuing degree programs at this time. Such internal recruitment has proved to be highly effective and rewarding for the professional and support staff, the administration, the patrons, and the library itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeanne Holba Puacz is a Systems and Reference librarian at the Vigo County (Indiana) Public Library. Additionally, she is the library Webmaster and is responsible for the majority of the public computer training. She received her M.L.S. from the University of Illinois-UrbanaChampaign and is teaching reference at Indiana University's School of Library and Information Science as an Adjunct Lecturer. Her e-mail address is jpuacz@vigo.lib.in.us.