Keeping Current:
Student Employee Recruitment and Training
at Syracuse University's Bird Library

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Abstract

At Syracuse University Libraries' Bird Library, a departmental restructuring and change in staffing meant that student workers in the Access & Resource Sharing department needed to take on new roles. These shifts prompted the new team of supervisors to reinvent the existing student training program, in an effort to cross-train students in both stacks and circulation tasks, as well as to increase students' confidence, performance, and investment in their work. Revamping training involved creating a LibGuide, PowerPoint tutorials for all tasks, increased tracking of student progress, and weekly quizzes using LibWizard. Modified hiring strategies were introduced, focusing on the recruitment of graduate student applicants to the MSLIS program on campus, offering a paid position at Bird Library as part of their admission package. Overall, these changes resulted in success, making training more efficient and effective. As evidenced by analysis of the LibWizard quizzes over two semesters, improvements in students' understanding and retention of library processes and procedures were seen.

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

The role of the student library worker is evolving, with students taking on greater responsibility than ever before. In many libraries, staff are required to rely more on student workers to perform tasks previously delegated to full-time staff. Student supervisors are presented with an opportunity to engage with students in new ways, both through initial and ongoing training and communication.

Like many large institutional libraries, Syracuse University Libraries employs over 150 student workers, both graduate and undergraduates. Student staff fill roles within nearly every department in Syracuse University Libraries, across multiple library locations, from administration to archives and special collections. The Access & Resource Sharing (ARS) department at Bird Library, the main library on campus, employs about 15 undergraduates and 6 graduate students every semester. These students represent a wide

variety of majors and degree programs, particularly among the undergraduate employees. In the past, graduate students came from the iSchool, the museum studies program, and the social sciences. An informal hiring practice prioritizing graduate applicants pursuing their M.S. in Library and Information Science had been followed for many semesters.

For many years, the stacks maintenance responsibilities at Syracuse University's Bird Library were a function of a dedicated team, including one stacks supervisor and student employees. These students were solely responsible for shelving, shelf reading, searching for missing books, and shifting projects within the library. At the same time, the library employed a team of full-time staff and student workers to staff the circulation desk and provide assistance to patrons borrowing library materials.

Due to retirements and resignations, the department underwent a restructuring. Stacks and circulation responsibilities were merged, leaving staff and student workers in need of cross-training in both skill sets. Given the reduced workforce of the department, full-time staff were occupied with their daily respon-sibilities, and dedicated time for student training was elusive. This resulted in stressful conditions for both staff and student employees. As vacancies were filled, the department gained two newly appointed ARS supervisors and an ARS manager; conditions were ideal for the creation and implementation of a new student and staff training program. The newly established ARS leadership team focused on the shared goals of supporting student employees and set out to create a viable, ongoing student training program.

While a number of existing studies, methods, research, and examples are reviewed in the following section, the Bird Library ARS team discovered that the most critical aspect of building a model for student training was first assembling a team of staff leaders. The unified ARS team set an example of the collaborative mindset that they wished to foster within the department, and provided a support system and sounding board for one another throughout the training process. Using this collaboration, the team created training solutions that not only benefited the department, but empowered students to feel confident in their workplace skills. Inspiration and specific ideas can be drawn from the Syracuse University Libraries' ARS team, but their experience began with conversations that led to collaboration. This article aims to prompt similar conversations that will help form strong teams.

Literature Review

With such an established history of libraries' student workforce, it stands to reason that there are many articles citing recommendations for hiring, training, and supervising student employees. For new supervisors, the availability of resources on training student employees is important for their career growth. While the training and mentorship offered by their own supervisors or experienced peers is an invaluable asset, literature on the topic is another important resource that new supervisors should mine. The wide range of perspectives on the issue is reflected in the array of approaches described in the literature, and even on the style of the articles themselves. Existing literature on training student employees is diverse, approaching the subject from a number of perspectives. Some sources provide a practical, hands-on report of training tactics that were employed at a particular institution, while others describe the theories and models that have been tested.

Though student workers' roles are changing, the student workforce has been a strong presence in the library world for almost a century, as noted by Kathman and Kathman (2000) in their well-known article "Training Student Employees for Quality Service". These authors focus on conceptual framework for student training, using a variety of training methods. They hoped to provide an adaptable model that can be customized based on the specific size and atmosphere of an institution. According to Kohler (2016), this is a more typical approach taken in articles written in the 1990s - 2000s time period. He also describes the importance of scalability, pointing out a number of issues that plague

smaller institutions. Despite this claim, the issues Kohler mentions are universal.

Because students are increasingly required to perform more specialized tasks, utilizing "evidence-based practices," is a method sometimes employed to train students. This means that the practices were "researched and tested in a controlled study with the results published in peer-reviewed journals," according to Martinez (2014, p.552). Taking a more career-focused tack, Maxley-Harris, Cross, and McFarland (2010) surveyed current library employees to discover if there was a recognizable trend in the number of current library professionals who began as student employees. They found no conclusive pattern, but propound encouraging current student workers to pursue library professions. Those students not aiming for a career in the library or information science world can still benefit greatly from student employment opportunities. "Academic libraries are in a unique position to evolve student employment into being more than merely a part-time job and to contribute to students' academic and personal success" (Melilli, Mitola & Hunsaker, 2016, p.430). The authors of "Contributing to the Library Student Employee Experience: Perceptions of a Student Development Program" found that the professional and personal development workshops hosted by the library received positive responses from student employees in attendance (Melilli, et al., 2016).

Other studies focus on specific training techniques, including the evidence-based methods that Martinez (2014) suggests pairing with close supervision and coaching, along with side-by-side working. She entreats supervisors to patiently "instruct, correct, and layer lessons" (p.560) for the most comprehensive training. Martinez, and Manley, in "Hiring and Training Work-Study Students: A Case Study," (2014) recommend the use of checklists to track students' learning. Manley also follows Martinez's other suggested methods, describing the steps taken at Marygrove Library to attract, hire, and successfully train the best student candidates, all while working within the library's diminished resources. In "Effective e-Training:

Using a Course Management System and e-Learning Tools to Train Library Employees," by See and Teetor (2014), the authors describe the need for a centralized, efficient training infrastructure. They implemented the use of e-learning software to introduce self-paced tutorials, quizzes, and scenario-based training modules.

As this small sampling of articles shows, many approaches to student training have been planned, implemented, and evaluated in formal reports. Despite an abundance of suggestions and theories, those resources that provide outcome evaluation on the results of particular training techniques may prove most useful for new supervisors. In the following explanation of our process, we hope that the outline of our own student training program development will provide usable techniques that can be adopted in other libraries, regardless of size or demographics.

Approaches and Methods

During the 2016 summer session, the authors put together a working group of day and evening supervisors and a staff member who worked closely with student employees (see Appendix A for timeline). The goal was to brainstorm new ideas for student training, create new training materials, and update any existing materials for continued use. Meeting weekly to share updates, the team realized that students were not as thoroughly trained as they needed to be, and that supervisors had been relying too heavily on one-on-one training with a supervisor. There were few materials students could reference after training had ended and supervisors had no existing tools to evaluate students' performances until end of the year reviews as mandated by HR.

The ARS group created PowerPoint presentations for:
- *customer service* – how to behave professionally in front of patrons, how to be proactive in offering assistance, how to handle and refer requests, and who to get when patrons were dissatisfied or became angry

- *the Integrated Library System (ILS) software* – how to check in and out materials of all kinds including InterLibrary Loan, technology, and reserves
- *the libraries on campus* – where each was located, what kinds of materials were at each, hours, policies, and contact information
- *the Library of Congress Classification System* – the basics on what the letters and numbers meant, how to read the decimal places
- *reserves* – how to search the ILS and library web site to locate reserves, where to find material on reserve for classes, what the loan periods are for different reserve materials
- *Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) security* – what it is and how it works, how to place and activate an RFID tag in a book, how to deactivate tags at checkout
- *shelf-reading* – how to read a call number and determine if it is in the correct place on the shelf, where to find the current list to work from, how to mark if an item was in the correct spot, missing, or mis-numbered
- *shelving* – how prepare a new cart to be shelved by entering into the ARS shelving database, how to mark that the cart was shelved, where to put carts that were ready to be shelved, which floors have which call number ranges
- *student expectations* – how student employees were expected to behave at work, what the procedures were for calling out, dress code, and the like

Where relevant, the training slides included screenshots of the actual software being used and many included photographs of the actual workspace so students could see exactly where something belonged. This would help the student employees recognize where materials could be found or where library items needed to be routed.

The authors also created a LibGuide to house all these presentations and include other pertinent information like common phone extensions, common departments to transfer calls to, and answers to questions frequently asked at the front desk. This page was bookmarked and opened automatically each time a browser was opened at the desk computer.

A new student orientation became mandatory for all student employees – including returning student employees – in the ARS department. This was a time to go over expectations, policies old and new, and to give students a chance to meet each other and their supervisors, even if the shifts they were going to work didn't typically overlap. At this orientation, a student employee manual was given to every student employee. The team updated the student employee manual to cover things like cell phone use, the procedure for calling in sick or trading shifts with other students, and what type of side work or homework was acceptable to do if work was slow. Students were required to read it on their first shift and sign that they received and reviewed it with a supervisor.

As students began their training, supervisors explained the task they would be learning and provided time to go through the related PowerPoint presentation. After this, the student was paired with either a staff member, supervisor, or previously trained student employee to work on the task. This would give the new student employee the chance to try the work hands-on and have a knowledgeable person immediately available for questions. In tasks like shelving, this was particularly important since there was a high probability of materials being misplaced while students were still learning.

Each student had a checklist for the tasks they needed to learn and supervisors marked off each with their initials and the date that it had been reviewed. This kept all supervisors in the loop on who had already been trained in which areas. Each student also had a sheet in an Excel workbook that was only accessible to supervisors. Here, the authors could track how many times the students were absent, late, or picked up shifts for other student employees. There were areas for the date, the reason for lateness or absence, and who spoke to the student about it. Since not all supervisors worked

all shifts, this was implemented in the hopes that it would help everyone stay informed.

While all students were required to be evaluated at the end of the school year per University policy, there wasn't another system in place to evaluate student employees throughout the year. Deciding to follow the same evaluation format, supervisors began to perform evaluations each semester. For new student employees, there was an additional evaluation after one month of working, then each semester like the other previously trained student employees. Supervisors stressed to the student employees that the evaluations were just a way to communicate; any issues that were discussed during the evaluation would not be surprises and would have been regularly brought up beforehand with attempts to retrain to increase performance or adherence to policy. Though it was not required, student employees were also encouraged to complete a formal evaluation of their experience working in the department and submit it either anonymously or with their names to their supervisor or the library administration office.

Student work was also evaluated throughout the year by using LibWizard's quiz function. Rotating through the three supervisors each week, one supervisor created a brief quiz on policies, locations of items, and frequent questions (see Appendix B.1 for examples). Staff were also expected to complete the quizzes so they could help students if they had questions. Students were allowed to look at their notes, the LibGuide, the PowerPoints, ask staff members and each other to find the answers. ARS supervisors wanted students to be informed and know where to look when these questions arose, not feel stressed. When questions were incorrect, this offered an opportunity to talk with the employee(s) and make sure they understood the correct answer. Questions would be occasionally recycled to see if the information and training was retained.

Even though the entire student training program had been revamped and improved, there were still two remaining problems to solve: hiring the best candidates for the job and getting students

hired and trained quickly for the new semester. Diligent undergraduates were often planning ahead and looking for on-campus employment opportunities well in advance. Instead of waiting until the start of the new semester, jobs for undergraduate students were posted the semester before.

Applications were received through the university-wide Human Resources online portal. Here, supervisors could post jobs, send out interview requests, send out rejections, and close jobs that had been filled. Students were required to fill out information like their availability, how much work-study they were allotted, how many hours they wanted to work per week, and what their work history looked like. There was also space to attach resumes, cover letters, and references. For students inquiring at the front desk about work opportunities, the department staff printed small cards with the URL for the online job portal and information about how to apply. Though undergraduates are a crucial part of the workforce during the semester, the department did not actively recruit undergraduates - did not post flyers in buildings on campus or reach out to professors who may have interested students. Nonetheless, the department often received hundreds of applications per job posting. Supervisors were able to select from this pool, interview, and hire undergraduate students before they left campus for the summer.

A partnership with the library school on campus also helped to solve the problems of finding the best candidates and training quickly. By working with the admissions staff at the library school, the department was able offer incoming Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students a job as part of their acceptance package. This partnership allowed staff to recruit candidates that were enthusiastic about library work and offered the chance for future librarians to put relevant experience on their resumes.

These incoming MLIS students were interviewed before being offered the position. Improvements were made to the interview process to provide supervisors with a more comprehensive view of the applicant. The supervisory team

brainstormed new questions that might give more insight into student workers' interests, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses (see Appendix C). Interviews began with an explanation from supervisors about the position and what kinds of jobs and projects the student would be working on. It was clarified that if students did not have paid work experience, that they could draw from volunteer work, internships, or extracurriculars for examples. Then, the student was interviewed. A small quiz was also given. The student was given printed instructions on basic shelving following the Library of Congress system and a set of cards with basic call numbers printed on them. They were instructed to do their best to place the call numbers in the correct order based on the Library of Congress rules they had just learned. The student was given approximately 5-10 minutes to sort the 30 cards while supervisors left the room. The student was allowed to refer to the instructions, ask for more time, or ask a question of the interviewers. Supervisors then reviewed the sorting and explained the errors, if any. Time at the end of the interview was reserved for the student to ask questions.

Recruiting graduate students from the library school also helped resolve the problem of too little training too close to the start of the semester. Many graduate students were looking for on-campus positions early as they were making decisions in the spring and early summer about where they would attend graduate school in the fall. Fortunately, at Syracuse University, graduate students are paid from a different set of funds and the department is allowed to have graduate students work over breaks and during the summer, while work-study students cannot. As new graduate student employees moved to the area in late July or early August, they were able to start working right away. Having the graduate students start earlier was done in hopes that they would be fully trained by the first day of classes and able to feel confident in their abilities.

Though undergraduate students are generally unable to work during the summer months, they are still a crucial part of the workforce during the semester. Since the many of the recruited

graduate students began work in the slower summer months, they were fully trained and able to assist in training of these new undergraduate students.

Outcomes

Many aspects of the revamped training program resulted in success. Hosting a student orientation has been valuable in getting students acquainted with their new role, supervisors and co-workers. Since student schedules change from semester to semester, it is beneficial for them to all come together and meet each other so that they are familiar with everyone in the department instead of just those who happen to work the same shift. The student orientation also serves as an opportunity to provide clear expectations for all students. Supervisors spend less time explaining expectations individually to students later, as all student employees are presented simultaneously with the same guidelines.

With an average of 20 students covering 104 service hours per week, regardless of how much training is done with the students, it is inevitable that some things are forgotten or misinterpreted. Attempting to catch all of our students when problems arise is stressful and not very efficient for the supervisory team. Weekly quizzes have become an effective tool in ensuring that the entire department remains on the same page and everyone receives the same information.

Implementation of weekly quizzes has served both as a training tool itself and as a way of assessing the quality of training students. Scores fall consistently in the 70%-80% range (see Appendix B.2). This is an indication that the quizzes consistently address and clarify policies and procedures about which employees have some degree of uncertainty. Feedback from students has been positive since implementation of the quizzes. Returning student employees - working before implementation of the quizzes - have expressed that the quizzes help them feel more informed. One student stated that when she missed a question on a quiz, it helped her remember the correct procedure the next time it occurred in real life. Periodically during the

second semester of this program, the exact quiz from the previous semester was administered. In these cases, the scores of returning students in the second semester were significantly improved indicating that the quizzes helped students retain the information that they learned from the quizzes (see Appendix B.2).

Supervisors have found the quizzes to be incredibly helpful in pinpointing exactly where each student may be struggling. Supervisors are able to clearly see areas that students aren't comprehending policies and address those problems with the individual student rather than sending email reminders to all student employees.

Changes in hiring practices have also significantly contributed to the success of the department. The collaboration with the University's library school benefitted all involved. The iSchool was able to present a competitive and attractive award package to some of their best applicants, making the offer to attend Syracuse University more attractive. The libraries gained excellent graduate student employees who were not only competent and reliable in their jobs, but also possessed a passion for library work and went above and beyond expectations. The MSLIS students gained valuable library experience to supplement and support their coursework.

Additionally, hiring these students during the much calmer months of June and July was invaluable as they could be fully trained while there was plenty of time and staff resources available. When the busy first couple weeks of the semester rolled around, there were experienced students available to work at the desk and expertly answer questions and welcome new students to campus.

The authors expected the new model of using the same students for both desk work and stacks to reduce stress on supervisors in regard to scheduling and training as more students would be available with both skill sets. Through this model, there was an added benefit of ensuring that all students were more invested in the tasks they were completing. Since all students now

work in both areas, they have a more comprehensive understanding of the library and how their work in each area impacts the other. Students are able to provide more accurate and detailed information to patrons asking the questions at the desk because they have a thorough understanding of the library.

Future Plans

The group plans to improve orientation sessions to make them more interactive and get the students more involved and engaged rather than just sitting and listening to staff expectations. This is seen as a potential opportunity to make students feel welcome and at ease as they embark on their new role as a student library assistant. Breaking students into small groups to role play common scenarios they will encounter at the desk is one model that is being explored for the future. Students are required to attend the orientation session so this could provide an excellent opportunity for veteran students to share their experiences with new students, quelling any anxieties they might have. Working to make student employees feel comfortable and part of a team, the authors believe that this will in turn give them pride in their work and the desire to put forth greater effort in creating a positive experience for patrons.

Training materials are continually under review and improvement. The creation of videos are in process to document some departmental processes (e.g. emptying the outdoor book drop or shelving a cart of books) from start to finish. Since students have many different strengths and learning styles, providing a variety of clear documentation for students to easily refer back to independently, can empower them to feel confident in their responsibilities. Quizzes can also be utilized to assess the effectiveness of training videos. Using software such as Camtasia, supervisors can pause the training video at appropriate moments to insert a question about what has just been explained.

Though most student workers will not go on to careers in libraries once they've graduated, many students don't realize the transferable skills they are gaining through their job in the

library. However, their position with the library can provide them with experience that will be invaluable to future employers, such as customer service skills, attention to detail, problem solving and time management skills. In the future, a goal of the department is to spend more time showing students how their daily tasks in the library are helping them to become top candidates to future employers. As students graduate or move on to other positions, exit interviews will be conducted to talk about the work that they've done in the library and the specifics of how they might present it on their resumes to be most appealing to potential employers in their chosen field.

Additionally, the department will strive to tailor students' work experience to their interests by talking with them more through the hiring and training process about their interests and skills. Student employees come from diverse backgrounds and have a wide variety of skills and interests. By having conversations with them from the time they interview, staff can have a better awareness of projects in which they can apply their expertise to help the department by creating more efficient workflows or improved service for patrons. In turn, students will gain project management skills and an example of a successful completed project to share with potential employers.

Conclusion

At Syracuse University's Bird Library, the revamp of student training was, by observation and the collection of LibWizard quiz data, a success. No single factor led to the improvement of student training, but rather the aggregation of our team's multiple initiatives. It is the authors' hopes that our efforts can inspire fellow supervisors at other institutions to make improvements. The adoption of even small changes to student training makes a positive impact for both the library and its student employees. On the large Syracuse University campus, with over 20, 000 students, certain opportunities existed, such as the presence of an iSchool with a large MSLIS program and additional funding for graduate student employees. The authors are mindful that not every library is situated similarly, however, still encourage readers to expand their thinking

about the possibilities for student training, and to use these ideas to start conversations with future collaborators.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline

|	
Spring 2015 - Spring 2016	Within Access & Resource Sharing (ARS) department, stacks and circulation responsibilities are merged.
May 2016	Student training team is formed.
June 2016	Training modules are brainstormed and created by team.
June 2016	Student employee handbook is revamped & updated.
July 2016	Team plans mandatory student employee orientation
August 2016	Training modules uploaded to LibGuide
August 2016	Mandatory student employee orientation is held.
August - September 2016	Follow-up training is provided individually to each new student.
Ongoing	Weekly LibWizard quizzes are created. Student answers evaluated by supervisors.
Ongoing	Training materials and LibGuides updated regularly.

Appendix B.1: Sample Score Reports

Refer to the images below for sample score reports of weekly LibWizard quizzes, showing questions and score percentages.
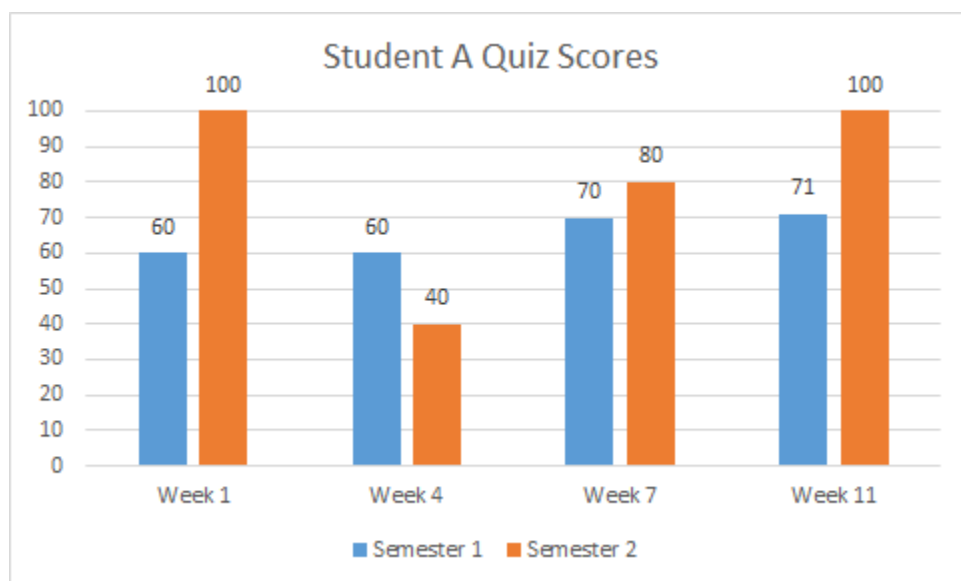
Week 2 Quiz		✕
Average Score	**Median Score**	**Std Deviation**
70.00	70.00	14.64

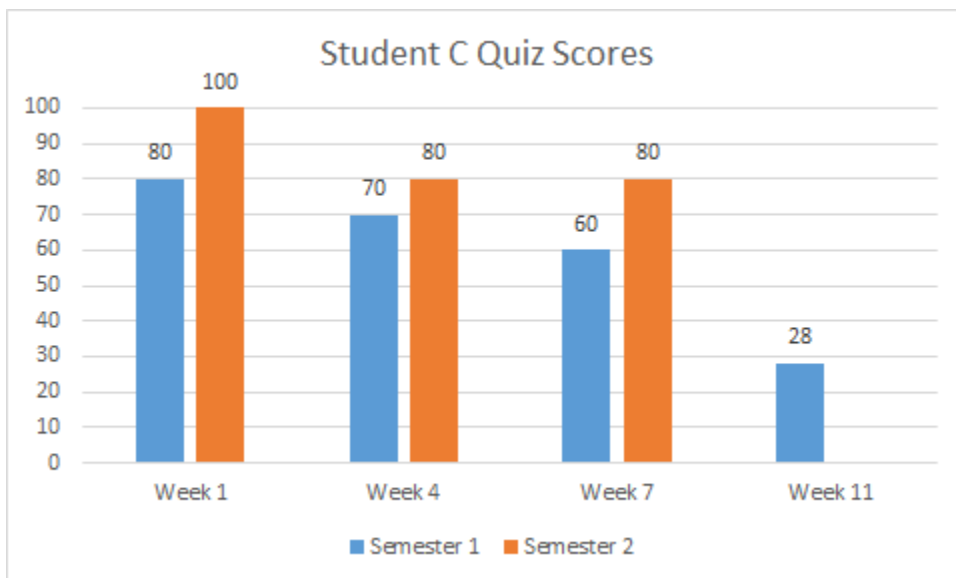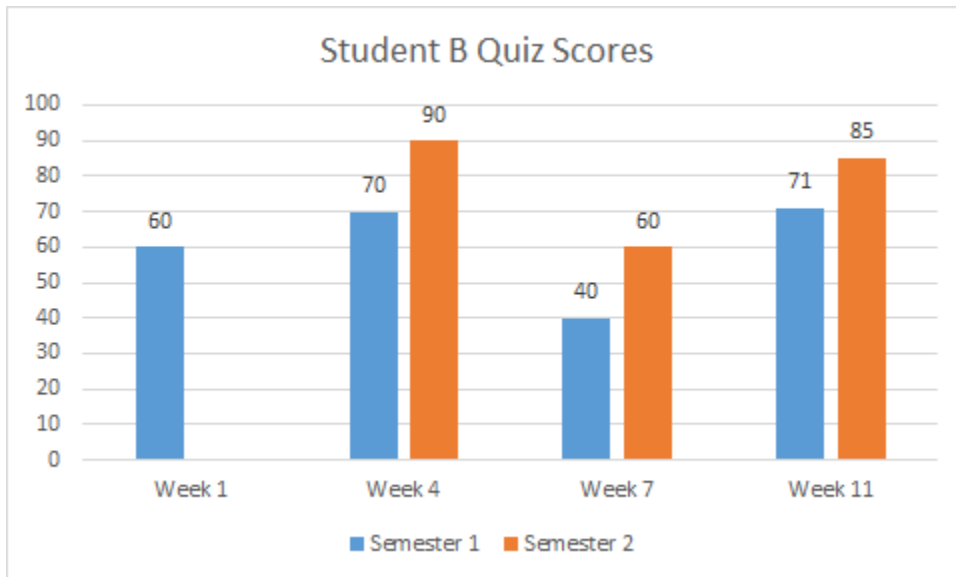| Question	Average Correct
Name	0.00%
How long does the new SurfacePro loan for?	100.00%
You are assigned to the desk at a slow time, an...	28.57%
You're checking out a reserve item and noti...	100.00%
Where can patrons pay fines on their library ac...	35.71%
Someone wants to renew their laptop over the ph...	85.71%

Close

Week 6 Quiz		✕
Average Score	**Median Score**	**Std Deviation**
82.35	90.00	16.28

Question	Average Correct
Name:	0.00%
Who is able to check out the Blackstone key?	100.00%
Reserve items with a loan period of only 2 or 3...	82.35%
While you're working in the stacks, you n...	88.24%
A student is having trouble logging in to ...	76.47%
A student comes to the desk and says they have ...	76.47%
When the 3rd Floor Desk is closed, patrons can ...	82.35%
You are shelf reading. When should you pull ite...	88.24%
If you are unable to work your scheduled shift ...	82.35%
Approximately how long does it take an ILL requ...	94.12%
Someone asks at the front desk for the Pearl Sc...	52.94%

Close

Appendix B.2: Average Scores of Weekly LibWizard Quizzes

Average Scores on Weekly Quizzes
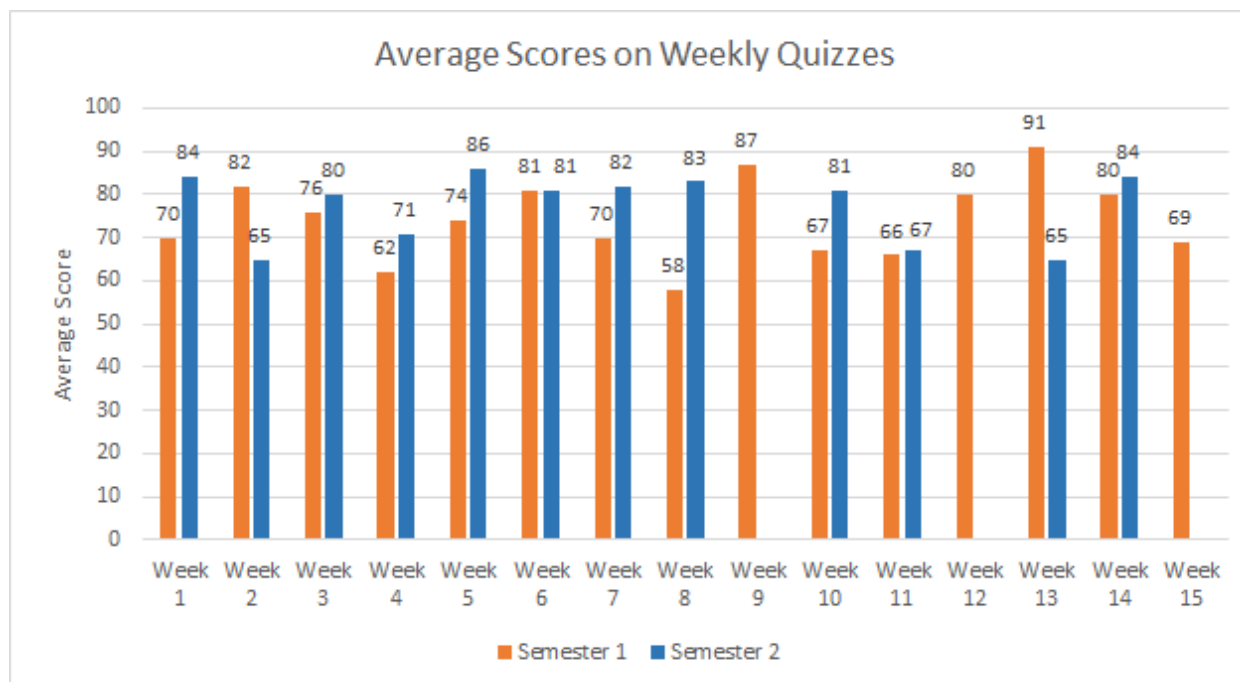
When students were administered the same quiz during the second semester, scores consistently improved. Scores for 3 sample students can be seen below.

Student A Quiz Scores

Student B Quiz Scores

Week	Semester 1	Semester 2
Week 1	60	
Week 4	70	90
Week 7	40	60
Week 11	71	85

Student C Quiz Scores

Week	Semester 1	Semester 2
Week 1	80	100
Week 4	70	80
Week 7	60	80
Week 11	28	

Appendix C: Questions

Previous Questions for Student Candidate Interviews:

1. Why are you interested in this position?
2. How has your previous experience prepared you for this position?
3. Can you tell us about a time you showed reliability?
4. Can you talk about a problem you had at work and how you solved it?
5. Can you tell us about a time you went "above and beyond" to help a customer or co-worker?
6. Please tell us about a work or school achievement you are most proud of.
7. Do you have any questions for us?

Current Questions for Student Candidate Interviews:

1. How has your previous experience prepared you for this position?
2. Can you talk about a problem you had at work, and how you solved it?
3. Based on the job description, which of the duties do you feel most comfortable with, and which do you feel may take some time to learn?
4. Some days and times are busier at the library than others. How would you budget your time on a slower day?
5. Describe a situation in which you felt it necessary to be very attentive and vigilant to your environment.
6. Describe a work responsibility or project that required you to work independently. What were your responsibilities? What methods did you use to prioritize your work?
7. What did you have to learn to be effective in your previous job? How long did it take? Which parts were the most challenging?
8. What skills or characteristics do you have that you feel would be especially useful if you were hired for this position?
9. What does bad, adequate, and good customer service look like to you? Feel free to use examples of times you received good/bad/adequate service or gave good/bad/adequate service.
10. Can you tell us about a time you managed an uncomfortable interaction (such as a rude patron, or a time you misunderstood a patron's request, etc.)? Is there anything you would have done differently?
11. What are some skills you would like to learn or improve on at this position?
12. What parts of your work have given you the most satisfaction or feelings of accomplishment?