

EPISODE ONE:

How to Motivate and Nurture Student Workers

by Kelly Browne

Editor's note: The following is an adaptation of a program presented at the 1999

Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., "Meeting 'Them' at the Crossroads: How to Motivate and Nurture Student Workers." Space limitations preclude AALL Spectrum from

being able to print the transcript in its entirety; members wishing to sample the full wonderment of "The Kelly Show" should acquire the audiotape for Program H-2 (http://www.aallnet.org/products/products_educational.asp). Suffice it to say that Oprah Winfrey could learn a thing or two about presenting an informative and entertaining talk show from Kelly Browne and her cohorts in creativity. On with the show.

Kelly: Our topic today is "How to Motivate and Nurture Student Workers." Student workers are an integral component of many law library operations, comprising almost 25% of all academic library employees. They perform a wide variety of tasks, including many routine and monotonous, but very important, responsibilities. Student workers are commonly the first individuals seen by a patron and their interactions frequently form the basis for the patron's opinion of the library.

So ... are your student workers always late? Do they eat and drink in the library despite the rule against it in 72-point type

above the circulation desk? Do they surf the Net at work, looking for pornographic pictures? Do they talk to each other instead of the patrons?

Well, why shouldn't they! How are you supposed to motivate people who make minimum wage and are only going to be at your library for a semester or two anyway?

I am very fortunate to have as my guests today three people who can shed some light on this problem. My first guest is Johnny Pedini, a disgruntled student worker, formerly of the Social Law Library in Boston, who is here to tell us his side of the story. Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Johnny Pedini!

Applause! Applause! Applause!

[Johnny proceeds to describe his work-study job—sitting at the law library circulation desk—from which he has recently been fired. Johnny was not particularly mature or responsible, but he also received no orientation or training and was managed in an inconsistent and alienating manner.]

Arkansas at Little Rock/Pulaski County Law Library for two years. Jessie worked as a paraprofessional at UALR, supervising the Circulation Staff, for five years before she earned her MLS, so she knows a little something about working with students. So now, please help me welcome Jessie Cranford!

Applause! Applause! Applause!

Kelly: Well, Jessie, I know you've been listening in the Green Room. Do you think there's anything that could have been done to save Johnny's job?

Jessie: Well, Kelly, I hate to say this, because I know it won't be popular with the audience, but this fiasco may have been as much library management's fault as it was Johnny's.



Pilar Vergara

Celeste Feather.

Audience boos and hisses.

Kelly: You're kidding! How do you mean?

Jessie: Well, two of the most important aspects of management, whether you're managing students or not, are communicating expectations clearly, and setting a good example, and it appears Johnny's supervisors did neither.

Kelly: Really? How so?

Jessie: Well, first of all, you have to let your staff know exactly what your rules and policies are, and the reasoning behind them. This doesn't mean you should be on the defensive; however, it does mean you shouldn't appear to make arbitrary rules. When staff understand that a certain procedure is followed to protect patron

privacy, enhance equal access to library material or services, or maintain better control of the collection, they may be more



Pilar Vergara

from left, Jessie Cranford and the hostess with the mostest, Kelly Browne.

Kelly: Ladies and Gentlemen, our next guest, Jessie Cranford, has been the Circulation Librarian at the University of

continued on page 10

motivated to enforce and follow that procedure. For example, I explain right up front that my bottom line is total professional demeanor when in view of patrons. Period.

That means no playing solitaire, no putting your feet on the table, no answering the phone "hello," no rolling your eyes at the patrons, etc.

Kelly: Tell us more about how to communicate clearly, Jessie.

Jessie: Well, you've got to let the staff know where they stand. If there are areas in which an employee needs to improve, communicate that

weakness and your expectations regarding improvement right away. Be specific about desired changes. For example, someone should have talked with Johnny about the library's computer game policy immediately after that incident with the dean. Burying your head in the sand and just hoping he won't do it again doesn't do anybody any good. It also really helps to convey the consequences of sloppy work and careless errors. Have the employee responsible look for the reserve item that may or may not have come in while he was on the desk. Let her know about the double-booking problem that occurred because a conference room key was checked out, but the information was not recorded on the scheduling sheet.

Kelly: Wow! Now could you tell us more about setting a good example?

Jessie: Sure. Once you've communicated your expectations, you've got to practice what you preach. Let your staff see through your everyday actions that you care about your library, your patrons, and them. Conduct yourself in the professional manner that you want them to adopt. Give them a sense of stability in their relationship with you by behaving consistently.

It is very important that student workers know how much the library depends on them doing their jobs, and that there are further consequences to not working their

scheduled hours than a reduced paycheck. It's hard for anyone to make a commitment to a job unless they understand the context of their work within the library as a whole.

You must stress to your student workers how invaluable their jobs are. That is the most powerful motivator of all. You know, once there was a study of shelf-reading behavior and productivity in five academic libraries in Texas. Student workers could have received extended loan time, release time, or increased pay for doing extra

shelf reading. And do you know what they found out? Productivity didn't increase for any of the expected reasons, but because the student workers felt the work was important, despite their dislike of the job itself!

A supervisor should let her staff vent, and be willing to go to bat for them. While I tell my employees that they may *not* express anger or hostility in public areas, they know they can express problems with patrons or co-workers to me in private. I will listen to them, and take action to remedy their complaints when appropriate. I also use positive reinforcement, praising work that is well-done and noting successes as well as failures.

As Jessie is talking, Johnny is obviously falling more and more in love with her.

Jessie: For example, I might tell a student that his repair job on a book was excellent, or thank a student for handling a problem patron so professionally, or

mention that I appreciate them being timely with a report. This may be challenging, but if a staff member hears only negative comments from a supervisor, they may adopt the attitude, "it's no big deal. Nothing pleases her, anyway!" While it may be difficult to compliment a problem employee, it's also sometimes useful for the supervisor to identify redeeming qualities in that person and work on cultivating those qualities.

Johnny scoots closer to Jessie on the couch.

Kelly: Wow, Jessie, this is great stuff, but it's almost time for our next commercial break. Do you have any other quick tips for us?

Jessie: Well, one thing that's worked well with me is fostering a sense of community. For my staff, caring about the students, faculty, pro se, and attorney patrons we regularly serve helps motivate higher performance. We want our patrons to have timely access to the information they need so that their research or their case will progress well. I also make my staff aware that I expect high levels of performance. I try to cultivate a sense of pride in a job well done. I encourage them to strive for better customer service, higher accuracy, and so on.

Johnny moves even closer to Jessie on the couch.

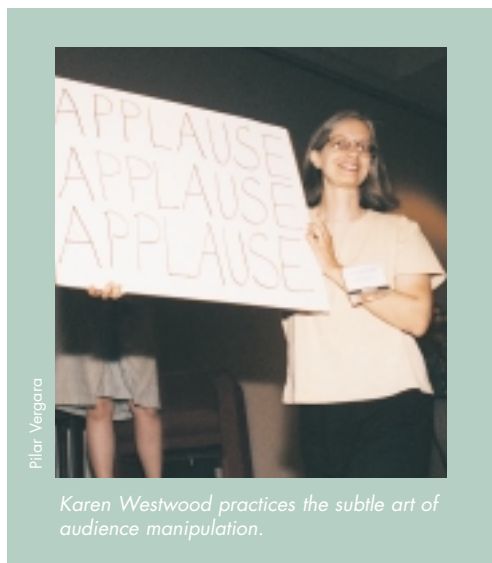
Kelly: Yes ... well ... *(finally realizing what is going on).* Ladies and Gentlemen, when we get back from commercial break, Celeste Feather, Access Services Librarian from Georgetown University Law Library, will join us.

(Kelly pantomimes asking Johnny to move away from Jessie; he vigorously declines, shouting, "You get back!" They scuffle;

finally Kelly calls for goons who escort Johnny off the set.)

[commercial break]

continued on page 12



Pilar Vergara

Karen Westwood practices the subtle art of audience manipulation.



Pilar Vergara

Johnny Pedini, not-quite-ready-for-prime-time disgruntled student worker.

Kelly: Welcome back to the show. Unfortunately Mr. Pedini was called away unexpectedly and had to leave. But I know you'll just love our next guest! Celeste Feather has been the Access Services Librarian at Georgetown for ten years. Prior to that she was the Public Services Assistant at George Mason Law Library. So altogether she has had twelve years of challenging experiences dealing with student employees! Please help me welcome Celeste Feather!

Applause! Applause! Applause!

Kelly: Celeste, Jessie's been telling us about some management techniques that would seem to work whether or not your staff includes students. I was wondering if you had any advice for us on how to manage students in particular.

Celeste: Well, yes, Kelly, as a matter of fact, I do. There are some differences between student and non-student employees, and a really effective student manager will find out what those differences are and capitalize on them.

Kelly: Oh, I see. What *are* some of the differences?

Celeste: Well, we all have to realize they are students first and employees second. And for many, it is their first real job. They have to deal with peer pressure (their friends don't understand why they can't talk for 30 minutes at the circulation desk) and academic pressure (they may be worried about a paper that is due really soon). Some of them are just developing a sense of responsibility and philosophy of work. They may not realize the rules of employment we take for granted, like showing up on time or calling if there is a problem, or, this is my favorite: realizing that their supervisor is the boss and that not all tasks and rewards are shared equally.

Kelly: Yes, to some it comes as quite a shock that not only is the library not a democracy, but that their vote is not even solicited. But those seem like negative differences. Are there any positive differences?

Celeste: Sure, there are lots of them. Students can be very enthusiastic. They have a love of learning and libraries. They have a strong interest in having an impact on the accomplishment of work (because they really do want to make a difference—they just don't know how). They are usually flexible, not rigid and set in their ways. They want to be taken seriously. Students are conduits to other students: I think they are an underutilized source of feedback and information for the organization. They can identify the needs of other student users, they *certainly* can evaluate our services, and they can provide innovative ideas that greatly enhance the overall decision-making ability of the organization. They also *usually* don't mind making copies or dusting shelves or whatever because they understand that they're just going to be there a short time and are "paying their dues." And the differences you thought were negative aren't really negative if you know how to handle them.

Kelly: What do you mean?

Celeste: Well, first of all, you need to recognize their split loyalty: It's just going to be that way and there's nothing you can

do about it. You must put their education before their library work, just like they do. Tell them, for example, "we will back you up if you have to miss your shift for school, but for us to do that you must let us know as soon as you know so we can plan ahead—talk to a live person the day before rather than leaving a voice mail at 3 in the morning saying you're going to miss your 8 a.m. shift because you stayed up all night studying, etc." Use their student status to your advantage. Tell them

Kelly: Wow! Anything else?

Celeste: Yes. I've also found that a "supportive" rather than "directive" leadership style works best with students. It's important that students understand *why* you have policies in place rather than just being told to implement something they don't understand. When you're training students, you should use the same teaching skills you use with patrons. Don't forget that people learn in different ways. You really need to incorporate a variety of teaching aids into your training programs.

Kelly: You know, I do something sort of like that. My goal is to treat every one of my student reference assistants as a future Law Librarian. I figure why not, that's what the law school development office does: it treats every law student as a future attorney *and potential donor*. The law students appreciate the respect and in turn, remember their school fondly. It's sort of like giving a tour to first years: "We don't expect you to know this now, but you will learn it, and you will be great!" But that doesn't work with everyone. What do you do with the underachievers that don't have that motivation already?

Celeste: Well, you try really hard to instill it. And it's hard to achieve the right balance; I admit it. With students you have to achieve success very quickly; the turnover is high and your training time is very limited. But you have to take more initiative in developing a working relationship with and cooperation from an employee because there are usually no promotional or developmental opportunities and the student may not completely accept leadership because he might be naive or immature in his working life. And you can't get too close.

Kelly: How do you train your students?

Celeste: Well, good training starts with an orientation, the goal of which is to improve communication between student and supervisor by exposing the student to the culture of the law library. This is the time to be clear about when to do something yourself and when help is



Goons on call: Johnny Pedini in the midst of being escorted from the stage.

continued on page 32

needed and how to get it, what is acceptable and what is not as far as working scheduled hours; notifying the supervisor of absences; how to secure acceptable substitutes (you can't just pull in your friend with no training at the circ desk while you go to supper for an hour) and how problems are dealt with. I find checklists and policy and procedure manuals essential. As Jessie mentioned before, policy statements and explanations ensure the appearance of not just making arbitrary rules. For example, it is second nature for me to answer the phone and transfer a telephone call, but I can remember when it was not. I know what a legal question is and what a reference question is, who can use LEXIS, WESTLAW, etc., but the students do not. Checklists ensure that all bases are covered and that the trainer and trainee maintain a mutual understanding of the process and results.

Kelly: That's great, that's just great. But now, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is time for the portion of our show where I go into the studio audience with the microphone so you can ask *your* questions.

Kelly: Hi. What's your name and where are you from?

Lynn: My name is Lynn Murray and I'm from the University of Mississippi in Oxford, and I just *love* being here on your show, Kelly. My question is, though, why even *have* student workers? I mean, the turnover costs the library so much what with screening and interviewing; placing them on payroll, training, and the loss of productivity until the new person is up to speed. What you're saying all sounds great, but isn't it a lot of effort for very little return?

Celeste: Well, first of all, students are cheap—not personally, well, most of them, anyway ... what I mean to say is they're less expensive labor than permanent staff. But the most important advantage to employing students is the opportunity for the enhancement of professional librarian work by assigning the least professional duties, like copying, to others. And I already mentioned this, but student employees are conduits to other students: they provide innovative ideas that greatly enhance the overall decision-making ability of the organization. They also can provide great PR for the library and its programs and services to faculty and other students. They tell their friends, and with word-of-mouth publicity you can get two or three times more people to attend something

than if you just posted a sign. Students are more than just extras, and in order for the library as a whole to benefit, *someone*, in reality *everyone*—it takes a village—must hire, train, and retain them, again, and again, and again.

Kelly: Hi. What's your name and where are you from?

Sibyl: I'm Sibyl Marshall from Mercer in Macon, Georgia. How exactly do you explain that you and the librarians can do things that the students can't without making the students feel bad or making the librarians look like hypocrites?

Jessie: Well, occasionally when I talk to students, I say something like this: "You may see us visiting or talking for a few minutes and don't see any difference in you doing the same thing. But what you might not have thought about before is that we are here much more than you are, so if we talk for 10 or 15 minutes it's fairly minuscule in the context of the whole day (15 minutes would be 3% of our time if we worked an 8 hour day). However, if you talk for 15 minutes of a two-hour shift, that's 12% of your time. Also, *as strange as it may seem*, when you see librarians 'talking and laughing and having a good time,' they *could* actually be talking about work. Some librarians like what they do and actually enjoy planning tours, discussing class scripts, or recounting reference stories for the benefit of the next person coming on duty."

Kelly: Hi. What's your name and where are you from?

David: David Gay, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. How many hours do you spend training?

Celeste: I'd say three to four with each student initially, but what we try to do is group new hires together so it really cuts down on the training time. But then it's quite a lengthy process before we cut students loose to work by themselves. They have a few weeks' supervision before they can work an evening or weekend shift alone.

Jessie: We have a similar situation at our library. We have a two-hour session where we show them the common things and then we work with each one individually. I also require them to read the Circulation Manual before their first shift. I don't leave them alone for two or three weeks without someone around who can answer a question.

Kelly: Hi. What's your name and where are you from?

Sarah: Sarah Conrad from Case Western Reserve University. Have you ever fired anyone, and if so, how did you do it and why did you do it?

Celeste: Well, I've gotten rid of a couple of people, and usually if you give them strong enough *encouragement* it doesn't come down to the firing stage—they will realize what's going on and quit. One of our Human Resources people made the comment to me a few months ago that "generally people fire themselves." I think that's true. It's been a while since I've actually fired a student, but I remember one time when this guy didn't show up at a critical time with only ten minutes' notice, and I told him he didn't need to bother coming back.

Jessie: We hire for one semester at a time, and I just don't re-hire them for the next semester. And, like Celeste, I've had a lot of people quit when they saw they were about to be fired. I have actually fired outright a couple of people, and that was painful to me, but the good thing about it is once people know that you will fire somebody, the rest of them take you seriously.

[Kelly is informed that someone has called in with a question for Jessie]

Kelly: Okay. Could you put him on? Hello? Is the caller there?

Johnny (on phone): Hi, uh, yes. I have a question for Jessie. In your capacity as the boss and everything, do you have to work nights and weekends? 'Cause I was wondering if you wanted to do something this Saturday night?

Jessie: I don't have tenure yet, Johnny, so I can't date students!

Kelly: Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, that's all the time we have for the show. You've been a great audience! Thanks for coming!

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