

Mentoring Your SWAT Students

Supervising students can present unique opportunities and challenges. This guide is written to assist supervisors of students in the SWAT program to assist, support, and mentor their student employees.

Student jobs are first and foremost a part of the student’s education. The SWAT program is unique on campus in how it provides students a wide variety of opportunities and experiences. We’ll say it many times throughout this guide: In order to succeed, students need clear expectations for what they need to do and frequent feedback on how they have done. (Clear direction and feedback are the way of life in their classes.) It is also important that the students see that their work is making a useful contribution to your department.

This guide will offer some key principles for managing the students you hire. Some of the things we’ll talk about are specific to SWAT students, but others apply to students in general. You can always contact the Financial Aid office for guidance on working with the SWAT program.

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[Portions of this guide are adapted from “Starting and Maintaining a Quality Internship Program” by Michael True, Messiah College, PA, with permission from the author.]

First Things First: Know What You Need

Set Expectations

Every job needs a description. While it's obvious for regular, full-time jobs, it's also true for student jobs, even if the student will only be with you a few hours. Both you and the student should know what work is expected and what a good job will look like. And both you and the student will want to make sure someone is available to help the student meet your expectations.

Before you do anything else, write down a list of the tasks the student will perform. The list needs to be specific. Something vague like "office duties" won't help you or the student be prepared. Remember, students need clear goals and expectations. So break it down. Do they need to send emails? Take phone calls? Be as specific as possible. It's better to have too many things listed than too few. If the student finishes the high priority work and needs something else to do with their time, having a few low priority tasks to give them can help them and you.

Know Who's Supervising

Once you've defined the job, you will select a supervisor. You or another member of your staff needs to be available at all times the student is working with your department. **Don't leave students to accomplish their work unattended.** The supervisor needs to be able to explain and, if necessary, demonstrate the tasks to the student. If the supervisor can't help the student to succeed, chances are both you and the student will be dissatisfied with the work they do.

Schedule the Student

Once you have the basics, you can schedule time with a student. Appointments must be made at least a day in advance, and preferably more. When you log in to the SWAT Scheduler, you will select a block of time with a particular student from the calendar. You can use the Focus filters at the top to narrow down the students you can see, so now that you know what work they'll be doing, you can find students who are best suited for it.

When you're looking at the time students have available, keep in mind that students will have to travel to your office from wherever they were before. If students have classes or another job immediately before the time you schedule, they may not be able to arrive on time. Give your student a little extra time to walk to your location.

Select a student and a time block, and you will be asked to describe the job. This includes selecting from a list the job duties that you wrote down before. It also includes directions to get to your office, the expected dress code, and any other information that could be necessary for the job. When you're done, you will receive a notification email confirming the appointment.

Orienting Your Student

Not only does every job need a description; your job also needs an orientation. If your student will only be with you an hour or two, it might be tempting to skip this part. But many students have never worked in a professional office. A little preparation before your student starts the task can save you from fixing mistakes later on. The sooner they understand what they need to do, the sooner they can help you.

Before the Student Arrives

- **Make sure you've selected a supervisor, and the supervisor knows what the student needs to do.** If the student will work with someone besides you, make sure that person is prepared to show the student what's expected of them and will be available to help if need be.
- **Make sure everything the student needs is ready.** If your student will be working with documents or spreadsheets, they will probably need a workstation and computer with access to them. If they will be installing or removing furniture, make sure they have any tools they might need. Get this done beforehand, or else you'll waste valuable time when the student arrives.

When the Student Arrives

- **Acquaint the student with the office.** Give them the basics. Tell them what your office does. Explain any rules that have to be followed. Introduce them to people they may need to work with.
- **Sit down with the student** and explain what the task will be and what it should look like when it's done. If possible, have an example of the completed task available so they can see what you expect (a completed inventory sheet, a properly stuffed envelope).
- **Discuss safety, security, and confidentiality issues,** if applicable.

Managing Your Student

The Mentoring Process

Even if a student has a little experience doing what you need done, they may not have enough. They'll need to learn. A big part of supervising a student is being a mentor.

Mentorship is simply the practice of providing expertise to someone new to a role or task. **The process of mentoring is simple;** being a good mentor means knowing what to do next and how to get there. **The goal of mentoring is just as simple;** you want the student to be able to work and succeed independently.

1. **Motivate.** If you are assigning a task to your student, it will help if you give them the big picture. Why is this task important? What are they trying to accomplish? Knowing this will help them to learn to think critically about how they're helping your department, and they'll feel more motivated to contribute.
2. **Model.** If the student is unfamiliar with a task, they'll need to watch it performed. Show them what the task is supposed to look like when done correctly. A key part of this process is **thinking out loud**. Explain every step and why it's important. If the student can look at a process or decision and see *why* you do it a certain way, they'll understand it more quickly.
3. **Coach.** Once you've demonstrated the task, watch them do it. Give them feedback when they've done something correctly or incorrectly. If they make a mistake, immediately and gently point it out and guide them to do it correctly. **Get them to think out loud** while they do the task, just like you did, so you can make sure they understand it correctly.
4. **Scaffold.** Scaffolding means providing resources to make learning the task easier when you're not there to help them. Scaffolds could include process documents, checklists, rules of thumb, or examples of the completed task; anything to help them get used to doing the task on their own. If they use the scaffold enough, they'll remember it every time they need to, and it will become part of their process.
5. **Evaluate.** Once the task is done, review the finished product and provide clear feedback on what they've done well and how they can improve.
6. **Reflect.** Give the student a chance to think back on the task and discuss what they've learned. Simply giving them a chance to talk about it in their own words will help them to understand it better and learn from the experience.

Setting Their Workload

Managing a student's workload can be tricky. This is especially true for SWAT students. It may take them longer to accomplish a task the first few times they do it, and the number of hours they can work is limited. Here are some tips on how to manage their time.

- **Keep the student's level of skill in mind** when you assign their tasks. If the project is long or complicated, you may only want to give them a piece of it to do.
- **Don't forget to provide scaffolds**, like process documents or checklists. Simply having an example of what the task should look like when it's finished can give the student a clear goal to work toward and save them time.
- **Schedule slack time into deadlines.** Slack time is extra time built into a task to allow for delays. If a task normally takes you 3 hours to complete, give the student 4 or 5 hours to account for the learning process.
- **Have backup work ready if needed.** If your student manages to complete the task in 3 hours and they have an hour or two left, have something else for them to do to fill the remainder of their time.

- **Accept responsibility if there's a problem.** The expectations you set your student are the ceiling for their success; they'll only do as well as the goals and guidance you provide. If the task is delayed or is done incorrectly, accept responsibility if there's more you could have done to help them succeed.

Providing Resources

Your student may not arrive with all the skills they need to get the job done. Providing them with resources to learn is essential to success.

- **Be ready to make scaffolds in a pinch.** If a student is having trouble with a task, taking ten minutes to write a checklist for them can save you hours later on having to redo their work.
- **Know what you have access to.** Every employee, including student employees, is provided with a subscription to Lynda.com and its countless professional development videos. If your student is struggling, you have places to send them to learn anything they need.
- **Be ready to mentor, or be mentored, about the internet.** The internet is enormous. When used correctly, it can serve as a valuable resource for professionals to learn skills or see how others have solved problems. If you are good at using the internet in your work, you can teach your student where and how to find information they need. On the other hand, your students will probably have grown up on the internet and may have a thing or two they can bring to the office. Be prepared to sit with them and see what else is out there you don't know about. Helping your student use the internet effectively for work will help them avoid using it in all of the other ways we know are ineffective.
- **Don't forget your coworkers are resources, too.** Your student will need to work on teams for the rest of their career. Let them practice now. If a coworker has knowledge or skills that the student can learn from, introduce them. If you're confident in your coworker as a mentor, you don't necessarily need to sit in with them; however, if you're not that confident, it's all right to be present for the meeting.

Providing Feedback

Whether your students have done this kind of work before or not, but especially if they haven't, they'll want to know if their work is measuring up to your expectations. No matter their level of experience, they need you, as a more experienced worker, to let them know if they're doing well. Take time to look at what your student has done, comment on their successes, and help them to shore up their gaps.

Having Difficult Conversations

It can be easy to forget just how much a college student has to worry about at any given time. Your student will have classes to attend and homework to do, friendships and relationships to cultivate, connections with family to maintain, clubs or extracurricular

activities to engage in, and the SWAT program. Your student may be late. They may not behave professionally.

We'll say it again: Student jobs are first and foremost a part of the student's education. Even if the student has performed poorly or treated others poorly—even if the student is being sent away—they need to understand how the consequences stem from their actions and what they can do to improve in the future.

- **Do not personalize what they have done.** Success in adulthood and a professional career rests in the ability to separate one's actions from one's potential. The student may have made a mistake or a poor choice, but that choice does not define who they are. Don't, under any circumstances, criticize them personally. Their value is more than their contribution to your office.
- **Think how your comments will impact their future.** Students will take their interactions with you into every job they have in the future. You shape their idea of what a supervisor will be, and they will interact with future supervisors based on what they learn from you. If you address a student's mistakes or failures by remaining calm, targeting the problem, and giving the student respect, students will take that expectation into their future jobs and they'll be better off for it.
- **Remember that their interactions with you may not be about you.** Students have lived their entire lives under authority, and many of those relationships may have been bad. Your interaction with them may be shaped by previous supervisors, teachers, or even parents. If this is the case, they will need help to develop healthy experiences with authority.
- **Poor choices usually have context.** Often it can stem from a lack of experience, or from concerns over their schoolwork or relationships. Sometimes it can stem from more serious issues. Students or people they care about may have to struggle with harmful relationships, drinking or drugs, mental illness, food insecurity, or personal insecurity. If a student has behaved poorly, there may be more behind it. Remember to be patient. **If you believe your student is in an unsafe situation, contact the 24-Hour Reporting Hotline at 844-428-6531.**
- **Remember your goal.** You are educating them on essential work skills. Plan every conversation to help them learn.

Conclusion

Managing student employees can be very rewarding. These are young men and women who may express interest in your field of work. They may ask you to serve as a reference for work or schooling in the future. Use the time you have with them not only to get work done in your office, but to help them become better workers. It's what the university is here for.