

# A game plan for when your office starting lineup ends up on injured reserve

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Much like the Seattle Seahawks this year, the office staff of Student Academic Services (SAS) at Seattle Pacific University was faced with two players from our starting lineup out on injured reserve for part of the season: one on maternity leave, another suddenly hospitalized, then home recovering from a virus that zeroed in on her liver. Fortunately, the SAS team rallied together and survived a stressful summer. I venture to say that we fared better than the Seahawks did.

Sixteen staff members comprise the staff of Student Academic Services. Besides the University Registrar, and the Office Manager, seven members are part of the academic counseling team, and the other seven are part of the Registration and Records team. The latter is the team that I supervise and the primary focus of this article. The starting positions in Registration and Records include two computer services managers, the associate registrar, the academic history coordinator, the on-campus registration coordinator, the schedule and publication coordinator, and the catalog and off-campus registration coordinator. Each position is fairly unique and specialized; thus each player fills a key role on the team, and when they are absent their expertise is missed.

Between June and late September our office is focused on graduating the senior class, registering the incoming class for Autumn Quarter, posting grades and providing transcripts for teachers who need to be recertified, and registering teachers for off-campus continuing education classes. The continuing education program alone generally enrolls a few thousand teachers every summer.

Keeping up with this volume of work while accommodating summer vacations for staff is sometimes enough of a challenge - imagine having 30% of your starting lineup moved to injured reserve during this critical point in the season. Tiffany, the Schedule and Publications Coordinator (aka: time scheduler and room scheduler), was scheduled for a nine-week maternity leave beginning in early June, and Kay, the Catalog and Off-Campus Registration Coordinator, was stricken with a virus in the middle of July that required a fourteen week recovery. Following are some reflections on how Student Academic Services handled this challenge and suggestions for how to successfully manage staffing shortages.



**Up-to-date and detailed procedure manuals are critical.**

Each position in our office has a backup who is trained to cover urgent tasks while a staff member is gone. In this particular case, Tiffany and Kay serve as each other's back-ups, having been cross-trained in case either one was absent. Now we were facing the situation in which both were not available. Since we knew in advance that Tiffany would be out on maternity leave, we hired a temporary staff member to cover her position. We were fortunate to have hired Kristi Oya - a June 2008 graduate (and seasoned veteran student worker in our office) to cover our time schedule and room schedule needs. Kristi was well prepared to move to the starting lineup because she had gone through a great training camp with Tiffany prior to the maternity leave. In addition to the training, Tiffany left a well-documented procedure manual for Kristi to refer back to when she had any questions on basic procedures and processes. A procedure manual is always a valuable resource, but when Kay was suddenly hospitalized and out of the office for several weeks, her procedure manual became a lifeline in a sea of urgent tasks. Kristi became one of our most valuable players by not only covering for Tiffany, but also perusing Kay's procedure manual and learning catalog data entry enough to keep on top of the urgent catalog forms that were received. Having an up-to-date procedure manual is a valuable tool in day-to-day work situations; however, when a crisis happens, the procedure manual becomes a critical tool.

Norwegian author, Henrik Ibsen, once said, "A community is like a ship, everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm". It is easier to take the helm if there are directions for what is required of that position. A procedure manual provides details and information regarding how the job is done and enables someone to do the job in an emergency. Encourage your staff to document their processes and to maintain them up-to-date. Compile those to develop a comprehensive user's guide to the office. Finding the time to write or update procedures tends to not be a high priority for many employees. The task may feel daunting, boring, or difficult to write to encompass different learning styles. Supervisors should establish deadlines for writing new procedures or updating existing ones and then check on each staff member's progress periodically. Being accountable to a supervisor to meet the deadline helps ensure the critical document exists in times

of need, which often come about when you expect them least! There will still be issues that arise that are not covered in a procedure manual, but having documented the basics will reduce many questions.

**Cultivate the spirit of teamwork.** We saw student workers add hours to help cover the vacancies, along with willingly learning additional responsibilities to keep critical processes moving. Staff members (including academic counselors) also stepped in wherever needed, such as answering phone calls, covering the registration frontline for breaks, and scheduling urgent room needs. An additional benefit we experienced was the fact that a couple of our academic counselors had formerly worked as student workers for Kay prior to graduation. They served as resources for questions or situations that required some additional sleuthing to solve.

For the past few years, during our staff meetings, we have focused on the works of John Maxwell, John Medina, Steven Covey and Max Dupree. Through these sessions we have discussed teamwork, different work styles, communication, prioritizing one's whole self, and the benefits of cross-training. In *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, by John Maxwell, he explains that the crux of the law of countability is "being able to count on each other when it counts". Besides staff development sessions or staff meetings, office retreats are also good times to focus on cultivating the spirit of teamwork among your staff. Therefore, in times of need, your team is already employing these practices of good teamwork. If we hadn't spent that time emphasizing the importance of teamwork, it might not have felt so natural to step up and take on these tasks.



**The all-important "huddle."** As tempting as it may seem, do not cancel weekly staff meetings because of the extra workload. It is vital to have a chance to be together, to jointly develop a game plan for the upcoming week, and to enjoy each other's company and encouragement. It is also a chance for each staff member to report on how they are doing and what they are focusing on. A team who has learned to trust each other and be honest about their workload will respond better to this type of meeting than one where trust is lacking. Huddles do not have to be formal meetings, but rather a chance for everyone to plan together. On the football field, during a game, the players quickly huddle together to only plan the next play. Sometimes a quick huddle in the hallway is all that is needed to plan out the priorities for the week.

**Foster good relationships with others around campus through lavish communication.** Student Academic Services has spent many years fostering strong working relationships and friendships with offices and personnel all across campus. We pride ourselves in giving accurate and prompt service to others. Now with key people out, we knew we needed a different game plan. I sent out what amounted to a press release to administrative assistants, department

chairs, deans and the continuing professional education department about our staffing situation. I explained that we would address all urgent matters, but for lower priority items – for instance, future catalog changes, we would hold on to those until Kay returned. We were impressed and encouraged with how the campus community responded with grace and understanding. Some departments even demonstrated the depth of their sympathy by sending Kay get well cards to her home. Their thoughtfulness truly moved us.



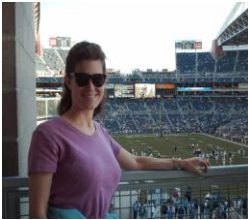
**Encourage and appreciate each other.** Supervisors are also coaches, having to oversee the implementation of game plans, and nurturing their staff members to peak performance and to believe in themselves. After a major victory, just as a coach may reward the players with a day off of practice, it is important to reward staff as well. Verbal praise is important, but tangible rewards are always appreciated by staff. A hand-written note from a supervisor or a quick excursion to the campus convenience store for a treat will help boost morale.

**Monitor for signs of burn-out in those with added responsibilities.** There is a limit for how much extra responsibility staff can maintain. Our academic history coordinator, Kelli, helped pick up Kay's off-campus registration responsibilities for two months in addition to her own busy job. Summer quarter is the busiest time of year for Kay, since she coordinates all off campus continuing professional education courses for educators who get credit through SPU, and summers are when teachers are more available to take classes. In a like manner, summer is the busiest time of year for Kelli. As the Coordinator of Academic History, she is responsible for posting grades and sending transcripts. During the summer, she is doing this primarily for the teachers who are taking continuing education courses. A typical summer day could involve mailing out approximately 100 transcripts. After six weeks of covering for Kay's job on top of her own, Kelli came to me, her supervisor, and admitted she was starting to feel signs of burn-out. The student workers and I divided Kay and Kelli's tasks amongst us and sent Kelli on a one-week vacation. As a supervisor, one must keep tabs on their staff for signs of work overload.

**Weathering the mid-season trade requires creative negotiations.** Kristi, our temporary staff MVP, was actively looking for full-time employment after Tiffany returned from maternity leave in mid-August. SAS realized there was one open position within our School of Education which we relied upon heavily – the Certification Coordinator position. Not having that position filled was detrimental to the processes within our office. Even though we were short on staff, and Kristi was keeping us afloat, we agreed to send her to the School of Education before her contract with SAS had ended. Since the majority of summer room scheduling and time scheduling requests that Kristi was working on came from the School of Education, we negotiated for her to keep her existing Banner

system access and continue to process only SOE-related requests for SAS. They couldn't refuse such a great deal, and we were able to reduce our workload with this agreement. The remaining staff in SAS relied heavily on the procedure manuals to continue the work for other departments. When a problem arose that all of SAS could not address, we would contact Kristi for advice. Encourage your staff to think creatively; to find new or better ways of doing work, or charter partnerships where they didn't exist before.

Much like all the football teams in the state of Washington this year, we are hoping to never experience another season like last summer in our office. But we did learn that we are an office that will pull together and accomplish great things. Because of that, I think my "coaching job" will fare better than the University of Washington's football coach! 😊



*About the author: Kenda Gatlin is the Associate Registrar at Seattle Pacific University. She has worked in various roles at SPU since 1984 having been part of Student Academic Services for the past 15 years. She has written articles on staff development as part of the PACRAO Writers Team and for Colleges and University. Yes, she also enjoys watching football (here pictured at a Seahawk game)!*