

A Survey of the Value of Library Employment to the Undergraduate Experience

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Title: A Survey of the Value of Library Employment to the Undergraduate Experience

The academic library is a diverse organization that is staffed by individuals with multiple levels of education, background, generational characteristics, and experience. Library student workers are a unique group to consider when exploring the overall impact of the academic library on the undergraduate experience. As both direct users and providers of library services to their peers, student workers enable libraries to gain an understanding of the general undergraduate population. Additionally, the student workers enable libraries to look inward to inform organizational changes which influence student workers and the undergraduate population at large. The Undergraduate Experience Team, a working group in the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) under Research and Instruction Services in New Brunswick, New Jersey, was formed in January, 2014. Among the goals of this team is to assess community impact of the libraries. A survey was administered to gain a better understanding of the identity of undergraduate student workers employed by RUL in New Brunswick, including demographics, academic and extracurricular interests, skills, and library experience. Survey results were also intended to develop recommendations on how to further integrate the students into the library's organizational identity. At the heart of these efforts is the notion of fostering a culture of participation for student employees. The libraries must first recognize the contributions that their students bring to the organization. Secondly, academic libraries must provide their student employees with tools so that they may better understand their own value to the organization and provide a voice so that they may better communicate that value in the workplace and beyond.

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An effective learning organization is defined by the willingness of all of its constituents to learn (Yu & Chen, 2015). Librarians and staff at RUL have a long history of engaging with student employees in formal and informal mentorships; however, as is the case at many institutions, the “core” of the library is often considered to be the professional librarians and staff. This is borne out in how policies are formed, how services and resources are selected and provided, and how programs are developed and executed.

This perception can leave student employees disengaged or unwilling to commit to library work beyond the minimum requirements. Librarians and staff may also fail to recognize their skills and potential as library ambassadors. As a learning organization-- one that is adaptable, flexible, and embraces change--it is important for RUL that the undergraduate student workers, who are often at the frontlines of this change, are fully integrated within the organization and their contributions are made more meaningful and transparent.

Rutgers University-New Brunswick is one of the largest academic research institutions in the United States with a student body of over 41,000 students, of which 32,000 are undergraduates. As such, the New Brunswick campus has a very strong undergraduate culture and identity. Due to its geographical location and proximity to the New York and Philadelphia metropolitan areas, the university is also a commuter environment, with many students, faculty, and staff residing outside of New Brunswick.

Library employment has many apparent benefits to workers, including financial support, proximity to resources, and the convenience of being on campus. Several recent studies (Han, Wang, & Luo, L., 2014; Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013; McCoy, E., 2011) have noted the less conspicuous advantages by showing evidence that library employment is correlated with higher grade point averages, better communication skills, more networking opportunities, and additional

mentorship. Unfortunately, it can be argued that this important role and added value of academic libraries is largely invisible to the university community and to the students who work for the library. In attempts to define and strengthen the impact of the organization and its influence on student learning and the college experience as a whole, it is necessary to further examine the important roles and contributions of the undergraduate library student worker.

Libraries must learn more about their student workers' identities as scholars, library users, and participants in the organization's social and cultural identity. Therefore, in fall 2014, the authors administered a survey to 350 library student employees. This article discusses and examines the survey results and considers relevant and recent literature regarding understanding undergraduate student library workers and formally incorporating them into the organization's culture through student training and, informally, through mentorship.

Literature Review

A literature review reveals a few studies utilizing surveys to learn more about library student workers. However, the majority of these studies relate to undergraduate student employees only marginally, as their focus is on graduate library students, professional staff, and faculty. There are no comprehensive studies on library undergraduate employees in terms of characteristics, academic disciplines, and extracurricular activities. One of the first studies of student employees was done by Brown (1943). In her research, Brown developed an inventory of the type of work done by student workers and asked important questions about what type of work they should do. For example, should students perform only the routine work that is assigned to them in regard to the basic functions of the library, or should the academic library view itself as an educational institution and seek to develop the individual skills and capacity of student workers? Brown

(1943) concluded that students need to be better “integrated” into the larger library enterprises and require more mentorship, guidance, and support from professional staff and faculty (p. 44).

Smith and Galbraith (2012) provide a starting point to understanding student employees and integrating them into library culture. They surveyed 500 student employees and their supervisors, receiving 185 completed responses regarding student employees as “millennials” and focusing on their preferences and values. The benefit of this study is that it compares the student-employee responses to those of their supervisors, revealing a disconnect in expectations. For example, supervisors indicated that pay rate was the most important motivator to their employees, and while that was generally true, they underestimated the importance of flexibility, personal satisfaction, meaningful work, and growth opportunities. The study also revealed that generational miscommunication was common between students and their employers. It showed that students have a much more casual culture than their supervisors: “The generation gap may pose a challenge for many library supervisors, who may not understand how to tap into these generational values to better recruit, retain, motivate, and communicate with younger employees” (p. 136). Yet the generation gap is a source of diversity for libraries, which should be embraced. As Smith and Galbraith (2012) state, “Understanding the values of student patrons and employees is important to the day-to-day operations and the future of the library—and of the profession as a whole” (p. 143). This suggests that including student employees in the library culture, as well as studying their behavior as an integral part of library culture, is an important step.

Jacobson and Shuyler (2012) take the effort further by surveying student employees regarding their perceptions about how employment in a university library affects their academics, engagement with campus life, professional skill development, and emotional/psychological

states. While the study sample was very small (19 current and former student workers), the article is important in that it is a direct survey of student workers. Students were asked about their motivations for working in the library and how it may impact them socially. The authors concluded that library professionals should continue to investigate and pay attention to the motivations and identities of their library student workers. The benefit to libraries, according to Jacobson and Shuyler (2012) is that, by understanding their contribution to the success of their student workers, they may be better equipped to communicate their overall value to the university community. This can only begin by a thorough investigation of who library student workers are and how they fit into the library's organizational culture.

Even though there are few direct studies of undergraduate employees in the literature, certain studies remain valuable for their methodology and insights. For example, Maxley-Harris, Cross, and McFarland (2010) surveyed library staff and faculty from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale to find out if they had been library student employees. The aim of their study was to determine if there is career mobility through which student employees eventually become library staff or professionals. This study is important, as it revealed that there are cultural gaps between professional staff, librarians, and student employees. For example, the majority of the hours students staffed were when librarians were not working. In addition, there was very little mentorship and informal career counseling between librarians, staff, and students. Most library faculty who started off as student employees did not anticipate that they would continue to work in libraries as professionals. In other words, "there is a disconnect between the library job and the library career" (Maxley-Harris, Cross, & McFarland, 2010, p. 158). This finding is important in contributing to the conversation of how student employees fit into the library's organizational culture.

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An article by Rosen (1994) puts this issue of student employees “belonging” to the library organization in perspective by considering issues of multicultural diversity in academic libraries and identifying the recruitment of multicultural undergraduate employees as a way to increase that diversity. This shows one example of an early effort to integrate undergraduate employees into the organizational culture of the libraries.

Academic libraries are indisputably places where cultures clash and technological change has a profound impact on the organization (Yu & Chen, 2015). Yet, in literature that examines how libraries deal with change, the student focus has been on graduate library students rather than undergraduates. Librarians are studied solely, instead of staff and students, who also need to be included in the discussion about how libraries deal with change. In Yu and Chen’s (2015) study, 162 university and college libraries in Taiwan were surveyed regarding whether a positive organizational learning culture can improve formal and informal learning among its staff. The authors define an effective learning organization as one that “relies on a positive learning culture and starts with an individual’s commitment to learn”(p.1). While their sample of respondents did not include student workers, it is important to consider student workers’ willingness to learn in the context of their duties at the academic library. If “all organizational learning starts with the individual,” (p.1) it is worthwhile to explore how student employees are currently enabled to learn through formal and informal training and mentoring. Further, how do libraries assist them in retaining and transferring the knowledge for the library organization to thrive and be sustained?

There are certainly many examples in the literature of efforts that have focused on training and mentoring student employees. Manley and Holley (2014) highlight the problems with students who are disengaged: “[P]roblems the library encountered with work-study employees

were their overall unreliability, disinterest in library work, and tendency to socialize with classmates while on the desk” (p.77). These issues clearly point to the need for effective and consistent training of library workers, as well as engagement via mentorship. Leuzinger (2011) recognized that student workers have a variety of learning styles, and it is important to design training programs with a diverse and engaging approach. McLaney and Webb (2004) surveyed academic libraries regarding the training methods they used, revealing that supervisors did not take advantage of many technologies that may aid student worker training and perhaps better fit student preferences. See and Teetor (2014) provide the student perspective of the effectiveness of a training program that uses a course management system to reach the greatest number of students effectively. They reveal that, while online methodology is very effective, a blended or hybrid approach may best suit the needs of students who still prefer some face-to-face interaction. Finally, Folk (2014) directly surveyed students to find out if their information literacy skills are enhanced by employee training. He compares the results to non-library student workers and suggests that employee training gives library student workers an edge, although his sample is rather small and it is difficult to make definitive conclusions.

Other articles discuss using student-employee potential and skills more effectively. Among them, Seeholzer (2013) discusses the benefits and strategies of harnessing student-created initiatives to inform, improve, and deliver library services to other students. Examples include organizing student-led focus groups on campus about the future of the library: “By enlisting the help of reliable students, academic libraries can not only determine the concerns and wishes of library patrons but also pilot services that help meet these patron needs” (p. 215). Initiatives, such as peer-to-peer reference help, which involves hiring and training undergraduates to work at the reference desk, are examples of this approach. External to staffing, student advisory boards,

“library think tanks,” and other initiatives can be used to gather feedback from undergraduates.

The authors maintain that student involvement can take many different forms, regardless of whether or not students are library employees. However, one consistent way to interact with students has been through campus employment. This also provides the productive interplay between students as students, the elusive demographic librarians constantly want to learn more about, and as library insiders. “By utilizing the same students who act as library patrons to identify and provide library services to others, academic librarians can better understand the needs of their audience and continue to offer core library services” (p. 223).

However, a question emerges: are training and mentorship opportunities enough to establish a culture of learning for student employees, which may further integrate them into the larger library organization? Or, as Gerlich (2002) puts it: “Can librarians provide the type of work that Generation Netters seek for job fulfillment, or should we let out a sigh of relief and admit that now more than ever, with a few exceptions, contingent workers are a thing of the past in academic libraries?” (p.147). Gerlich asks some important and difficult questions for the future of the academic library as an employer of undergraduate students. This role is complicated because often, “libraries employ students not because they are good or even okay employees, but because it has somehow become our responsibility as librarians to hire college students” (p.147). Such discussions provide the necessary groundwork for establishing how students fit into library organizations and what can be done to promote a balance between the role of the library as an employer, mentor, service provider, and educator of undergraduate workers.

Method

The authors of this paper serve on the RUL Undergraduate Experience Team. The team’s goals are to identify and define the Rutgers over-all undergraduate community, assess the needs

of this community through research, and build relationships and develop partnerships that benefit the undergraduate community. In the interest of learning more about the undergraduates who work for the libraries, the authors were charged with creating and administering a survey to all student workers employed at the New Brunswick libraries. The survey was entirely anonymous and no personally identifiable information was collected.

The survey was administered to student workers via email, using the tool Qualtrics, and included twenty-nine questions with options of yes or no, multiple choice, and open-ended responses. Upon receiving a static link via email, participants completed the survey at any time or location of their choice. They were also free to end the survey at any point or to skip any questions they did not want to answer. The survey was open for one month and two email reminders were sent. As the survey was anonymous, there was no connection between the email addresses and the responses of the student workers. Informational flyers were posted in all student worker areas to solicit participation. To obtain a list of all the student workers, the authors contacted the chair of the Student Coordinator Group (Rutgers, New Brunswick), who worked with her team to obtain a full listing of the student workers email addresses. Initially, the authors considered using incentives such as gift cards, however due to potential conflicts of interest, no incentives were offered. After the survey closed, the authors analyzed the anonymous data for correlations and comparison between the students' answers and the project investigators' hypotheses.

Results

The survey was administered to 350 student library employees in the 2014 fall semester; 121 survey responses were returned, and 69 were completed. This left the response rate for the survey between 19.7% (fully completed) and 34.6% (returned).

Who are RUL undergraduate student employees?

The library student workers surveyed ranged from freshmen to seniors. The majority of students employed were completing their first or second year working for the libraries (see Figure 1). Overwhelmingly, the students surveyed lived on campus. They represented majors from across the institution, with a greater number of biology, engineering, and pharmacy majors (see Figure 2).

INSERT: Figure 1 Length of student employment.

INSERT: Figure 2 Student majors.

The survey also asked students to indicate if they are (or have been) employed elsewhere on campus or participated in extra- and extracurricular activities, such as First Year Interest Groups, fraternities and sororities, etc. (see Figure 3). Additionally, 44 of 63 students indicated that they were members of clubs. These included cabaret theater, choir, science clubs (computer science, cognitive science, meteorology, engineering, astronomy), language clubs (Polish, French, Portuguese), cultural clubs (Association of Philippine Students, Muslim students, Society of Hispanic Engineers, Chinese Student Organization, Korean Student Organization), fraternities and sororities, and social activism (Human Rights Club, Habitat for Humanity)

INSERT: Figure 3 Student employee activity on campus.

The authors wanted to determine if student employees possessed skills that were not currently being utilized by the libraries, such as knowledge of technology and software (see Figure 4) and language skills (see Figure 5). The open-ended responses indicated that students felt they were being underused in their current positions, as reflected by some of the comments:

- “They can benefit from my great customer service, I don’t have much knowledge about things here in the library but I am willing to learn skills to be able to apply them here at work.”
- “I’ll do more than what is expected of me, if placed in the opportunity to do so.”

Respondents expressed willingness to work on special projects and gain additional skills in the areas of customer service, presentation skills, and marketing/event planning. Only 22 of the students surveyed had previously worked on a special project, but 32 expressed interest in doing so in the future.

INSERT TABLE FOUR : Figure 4 Student employee skills.

INSERT: Figure 5 Student employee language skills.

Student Perceptions of Working in the Libraries

Based on the review of prior literature, the authors wanted to find out if student employees perceive any benefits to their library work, in addition to monetary compensation. In the survey, students were asked what motivates them to work for the library (see Figure 6). They were also asked to indicate if working for the library has improved their research skills (see Figure 7). Finally, they shared their perceptions of what other skills (communication, customer service, etc.) have been developed through their library work (see Figure 8).

INSERT TABLE SIX: Figure 6 Student motivation for working at the library.

INSERT TABLE SEVEN: Figure 7 Student perception : effects of working in the library on research skills.

INSERT TABLE EIGHT: Figure 8 Student perception : types of skills that are enhanced by working at the libraries.

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There is a dichotomy between student statements regarding wanting more opportunities to work on special projects, yet not wanting additional mentoring. This is evident in the earlier comments in the survey where they wanted additional experiences beyond their daily duties that could help them develop skills that are important for future employment. However, the means by which they would receive these broader experiences and training would be under the supervision of a mentor. It was surprising to see an even split on this question of mentorship.

Some of the comments include:

- “I believe that creating more opportunities will allow me to expand my knowledge and grow in terms of professionalism and experience.”
- “This job is so I don't starve during college, not a resume booster.”
- “Not sure what I would be mentored in at the library.”
- “Working at the library does not correlate with my major at all.”
- “While I love this job, it is not relevant to my career field.”
- “This type of job doesn't relate at all to what I will bring doing in my future career.”

These comments are among the most significant results of the survey, as they seem to indicate that students do not see a connection between their library employment and future career goals. This could also indicate a deeper disconnect between their roles as “students” and as “employees” at the university.

Finally, students were asked to reflect on the social aspects of their experiences working for the libraries. Ninety-two percent of the respondents indicated that they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their work for the organization. Students specifically indicated that they have been able to form positive relationships with their coworkers and supervisors. The authors also wanted to find out if these student employees felt that working at the library has allowed them to

enhance their campus social networks by connecting with students and faculty in and outside of their major (see Figure 9). Some of the comments collected included:

- “[The library is a] great place to interact with professors.
- “My supervisor is very gracious towards his workers which makes for a very comforting environment.”

INSERT: Figure 9 Students forming social networks at their library workplace.

Of note, 95% of the respondents indicate that they use social media. Further, 76% responded that they follow Rutgers University using social media, yet only 27% interact with the libraries via this medium.

Discussion

Satisfaction with their positions at RUL was expressed by 91% of respondents. They repeatedly used the word “love “when describing their feelings for their jobs. One student commented that RUL was a “great place to work “». Looking more closely at the survey results, however, it is apparent that the students lack a full understanding or realization of the far-reaching benefits of working in the libraries. The library organization, by virtue of its continued willingness to hire undergraduate students, wants the students to succeed. However, it is clear both parties are comfortable with the status quo to the point that neither is aware (nor has acknowledged) that changing times call for a re-examination of the state of the relationship and the needs of both parties.

One theme that became apparent throughout the responses from our student workers is of a disconnect between the perception of the value of the student worker experience in the eyes of the students and that of the library organization. Students do not seem to recognize the benefits of working in the libraries as they pertain to skill development that can be transferred to future

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careers. When asked about what motivates them as library employees, the majority of the responses centered around positive feelings. They like their co-workers and supervisors, make friends, and so on. They also feel appreciated. Conversely, when asked about mentoring opportunities, many did not see a correlation with their major. Notably, they stated that they were able to gain many skills that they would take to their future workplace: teamwork, adaptability, social skills, organization skills, and communication skills. Further, some indicated that their academic performance is being positively affected by working at the libraries.

Neither party has taken the time or found the opportunity to really get to know each other. For example, while some students expressed interest in being mentored, the areas of mentorship that they could conceive centered around “library work”. They talked about more training to deal with patrons and library processes and even data keeping. Clearly, the libraries are not communicating well enough to provide students with a wider perspective of the organization as an educational entity rather than just a repository of information. There is also a disconnect with the library organization not recognizing the skill sets that students bring. The fact that students have technical skills that are not being used in the libraries or that their language skills are not being used is unfortunate because a pool of talent is not being strategically tapped. Again, it is a situation of mutual comfort but neither party is looking beyond the surface and recognizing value.

Another theme that emerged from the survey responses is the lack of communication, which feeds the disconnect. It seems that by virtue of the fact that these positions exist for work experience, the possibility of working on special projects, working closely with faculty and staff, and having mentorship opportunities that the students should know that there are benefits to

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working at the library beyond the token line in a resume. The libraries do not make this explicit.

Student workers do not understand their place in the library; hence they do not know their value.

The libraries traditionally show appreciation to student library workers with official recognition on designated days and at established junctures in their tenure. It is clear that the role of the student worker is necessary and therefore valuable in terms of operations: many service desks need to be staffed and library opening hours to be covered. The individuals themselves are provided with notable experiences. They gain valuable work experience and opportunities to interact with faculty and staff on a level that the wider undergraduate population does not. However, it appears that the place of the student worker and her/his contribution in the context of the organizational structure is neither transparent nor communicated currently.

Today, libraries must demonstrate their value more than ever. We need to find ways of communicating the value of the libraries to our student employees. Students need to be more engaged in the work of the libraries through more opportunities to work on special projects. A formal mentoring program will allow students to closely interact with professionals, and this will afford them a new perspective on the role of the libraries in the wider context of the institution.

Further, the libraries need to find ways to more intentionally integrate the student-worker role into that of the organization. On the surface, it appears that the role is integrated given the long tradition of employing student workers. However, with an organization that has structures in place that are well meaning and do inherently benefit the students, it would behoove the libraries to be more transparent and communicative to the student workers and to the library staff and faculty overall. Student workers should be seen more as partners, as they can bring valuable insights into how to better serve their demographic. This group of students can be the conduit to the wider undergraduate population as services and programs are developed. Noting the skills

that students bring in these times of budgetary cutbacks and utilizing them appropriately and fairly can empower our students and reassure the administration that this employer employee relationship is mutually beneficial. Training these student workers should not be an end in itself, but a means to a broader end. The knowledge that our students gain leaves the organization when they do.

Clearly, the libraries are providing opportunities for students to expand their traditional experience as employees. Some are able to do special projects and have some mentoring opportunities. However, these have developed organically and are based largely on the initiative of the mentor and revolve around the needs of the specific library location within the organization. A more formal and structured approach is needed across the board. Further, more focused methods of utilizing student talent, whether cultivated at the library or brought to the library should be developed. Students have stated that they have made friends with students outside of their majors. This is a new network that each student is developing. The libraries can take the opportunity to have students function as ambassadors of the libraries among the wider undergraduate population. Most of the student workers 67% have worked at the libraries for more than one year. This time can be used to develop a stronger relationship between the employer and the students. The foundation already exists for improvement because the students do feel positively about the organization. The onus lies on the libraries to enhance this relationship.

Conclusion

From this survey, the authors have learned more about the students who work at the libraries: their skills, their engagement with campus communities, and their perception of employment at the library. The survey responses suggest that few students understand the full array of benefits

of working in the libraries. The authors want students to recognize that library employment has academic, professional, and social benefits, and it is more than just a job. For this to happen, the library must provide more targeted opportunities for student, faculty, and staff collaboration. Additionally, the survey pointed out that the library is not tapping into the full potential of student workers and that students are eager to work on special projects. If the library can provide more engaging opportunities for this type of skill development, undergraduate students are likely to benefit academically and have more opportunities to succeed as graduate students and future professionals. Moreover, the libraries need to increase/improve communication of these opportunities, spelling out the benefits so as to change the student perceptions, expectations, and understanding and to increase engagement across the organization. This will also reduce the disconnect that exists through the opposing viewpoints of student workers and the library organization in general.

The findings of this study suggests that RUL (New Brunswick) should continue to use traditional methods of engagement to close the gap, such as creating listservs, using focus groups, and continuing to recognize the individual and collective contributions of student workers on designated days once per year. However, we need to create solid partnerships with students where they serve to advise the processes, and therefore execute tasks with more passion and become more active ambassadors of the library organization.

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