Contributing to the Library Student Employee Experience: Perceptions of a Student Development Program

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ABSTRACT

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. Library student employees at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas were surveyed to determine if their participation in a co-curricular workshop series added value to their academic, professional and personal lives. The study shows statistically significant relationships between class standing and level of agreement that workshops provided students with information and/or skills that will help them in a job after college and in their day to day life outside of work and school. The results of this study indicate that students find value in having opportunities to develop academic, professional, and life skills while being employed part-time. Potential future research studies are discussed, including the impact of such a program on student retention, progression, and completion.

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INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate students often struggle with the balance of work, school, and home life; however many students are required, due to financial need, to seek part-time or full-time employment in addition to carrying full course loads. Despite the pressures of added commitments, working in an environment that supports academic endeavors can contribute to the academic success of students through continued learning opportunities and skill development. With academic libraries often one of the larger campus employers of students, they are in a position to positively influence not only the transition to college life, but also the development of a student over their academic career.

In 2012, the University Libraries at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) designed, developed, and implemented a co-curricular workshop series and certificate program to support library student employees in their academic and professional careers. Through participation in a series of one-hour workshops, students acquire skills that aid them in accomplishing academic, personal, and professional goals. This workshop series strives to provide opportunities for the library to engage in the development of their employees in a culture of

mentorship, and student participants gain intellectual and practical skills including teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking.

This study examines the perceived value of this workshop series to determine if this program adds value to student employees' academic, professional, and personal lives. The authors of this study wish to contribute to the literature the ways that librarians and libraries can contribute to student employees through co-curricular programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For many full-time undergraduate students, part-time employment is an unavoidable part of their undergraduate experience. The *Profile of Undergraduate Students 2011–12*, published by the U.S. Department of Education, states that 61.4% of undergraduate students attending four year universities are employed part and/or full-time, and on average, full-time students work 26.6 h per week (United States Department of Education, 2014). According to recent studies, financial necessity is the most prominent reason for student employment, although students also report working to gain experience and to build their resumes as a motivator for part-time employment (Jacobson & Schuyler, 2013; McCormick, Moore, & Kuh, 2010; Muldoon, 2009; O'Neil & Comley, 2010). Regardless of the reasons for seeking employment, students are spending more of their time away from the traditional college experience of studying and campus activities (Hall, 2010), and because of this, it is important that university personnel working with undergraduate students begin to shift their perspectives on the role of part-time employment on academic success.

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The literature detailing the effects of part-time employment on undergraduate student success is mixed. The obvious concern for students who participate in part-time work is that time spent working directly impacts the amount of available time they have to study and thus leads to a lower GPA. Although students who have part-time employment report that they have less time to study (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Hall, 2010; Robotham, 2012), other variables such as work schedules and the number of hours worked each week need to be taken into account. Students reported having to skip non-mandatory study sessions due to work schedules and expressed concern about the effect that had on their grades (Hornak, Farrell, & Jackson, 2010). Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley (2008) noted that work schedules of 20 h or less did not have a direct impact on grades; however, students who worked more than 20 h a week did have their grades negatively impacted by the schedule. Other studies have shown that working between 10 and 19 h per week produced a higher grade point average than students who worked less than 10 h per week or did not work at all (Dundes & Marx, 2006).

Another concern for working undergraduate students is the impact on peer social interactions and campus engagement. With time split between school and work, many students report that they are unable to spend as much time as they would like with campus clubs/activities and that their social lives are negatively impacted (Hall, 2010; Hornak et al., 2010; Robotham, 2012). The research is mixed on the range of weekly hours spent working and the impact on student engagement. One study suggests that co-curricular involvement and peer interactions are negatively impacted when 20 or more hours a week are devoted to working (Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett, & Blaich, 2012), but another study by Dundes and Marx (2006) reports that as little as 10 or more hours a week decreased chances for peer interactions. In addition, a study reported that students working more than 20 h a week are more likely to perceive that their campuses are unsupportive versus students who work less (Pike et al., 2008).

It is easy to assume that part-time employment while in college negatively impacts students' success; however, multiple studies show that although working may take away time from studying and campus engagement, it can still contribute to student development in areas not typically associated with traditional classwork. With increasing demands on universities to produce career ready graduates, work experience can play a vital role in developing important soft skills that students will need to be successful in their studies and future careers. Studies conducted in the United Kingdom have shown that students who worked while taking undergraduate courses reported that the experience helped them to develop time management and communication skills as well as increased their confidence and ability to work with other people (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Robotham, 2012). Students have reported that "their work on campus, in a library or otherwise, is an integral part of their overall experience with college life" (Cottrell & Bell, 2015, p. 83). It has also been documented that off-campus work experience leads to the development of leadership attributes in students (Salisbury et al., 2012), and for students who are working in order to support themselves through the undergraduate experience, 10–19 h of employment a week leads to a higher prioritization of course work as they see their paychecks being directly invested in their education.

The type of employment that students engage in also has an impact on their career readiness and academic success. Employment that is related to a student's field of study contributes to a lower unemployment risk and a shorter job search duration after graduation, and graduates with field related experience are on average hired into positions with greater job responsibilities than their peers without the equivalent experience (Geel & Backes-Gellner, 2012). Off-campus employment, regardless of relation to the field of study, has also been reported by students as providing exposure to the "real-world" which helps them better understand what is expected from them when they move into a full-time position after graduation (Dundes & Marx, 2006). While less

studies have been done on the impact of on-campus employment, a study on students working 20 h or less a week on their campus showed an indirect relationship to increases in experiences of active and collaborative learning and student–faculty interactions (Pike et al., 2008). In the Pike et al. study, working on campus did not have a direct impact on student grades; however, active and collaborative learning and engagement with faculty have been shown to be contributors of student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

Working part-time may not have a direct positive or negative impact on student success, but meaningful work experiences can provide students with additional learning opportunities which can make up for time away from studying. On-campus employers working with undergraduate students can and should apply educational best practices in order to support student academic success as well as future career preparedness, and while not all strategies can apply to the working environment, there are some that are a natural fit. Campus employers who implement elements of internships, mentoring, engagement, and soft skill development communicate to student employees that their employer is supportive. "Creating meaningful work experiences for students on campus is a key element in an overall strategy designed to foster student achievement and success" (Pike et al., 2008, p. 577). Another approach outlined for student success suggests that expectations, support, feedback, and involvement or engagement create an environment for students to succeed. When these four conditions are connected, student success is more likely (Tinto, 2012). Moreover, "enriching the experience of library student workers benefits the students and also benefits the library in the sense that it transforms student worker positions into a form of active learning," (Cottrell & Bell, 2015, p. 84) elevating the library's role in contributing to co-curricular learning experiences for students.

Various studies have tried to show direct relationships between the number of hours of worked and academic achievement, but the relationship is complex. Recent literature suggests focusing on creating experiences for student employees to include educational outcomes (Perna, 2010). Student employment on-campus can be further transformed by focusing on intellectual development and considering the role of employment for student development (Pusser, 2010).

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

During an average semester, the UNLV University Libraries employs 105 to 120 part-time library student employees, the majority of which are eligible for Federal Work–Study Program funds. These students are hired across all library divisions and provide much needed assistance in close to 20 different library units (see Table 1). In order to guide consistent management practices for students while still taking into

Table 1
Overall perceived value, UNLV Libraries, Spring 2012–Fall 2014.

Student library assistant positions by unit — Spring 2016	
Circulation Desk	20
Media Desk	13
Stacks	13
Computer Desk	13
Safety	10
Music Library	9
Architecture Studies Library	9
Curriculum Materials Library	7
Special Collections	7
Collection Management	7
Interlibrary Loan	6
Digital Collections	5
Administration	5
Preservation Lab	5
Discovery Services	2
Library Technology	1
Mailroom/Purchasing	1
Assessment	1