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Student Employment as a High-Impact Practice in Academic Libraries: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This study is a systematic literature review of student employment in academic libraries. The review aimed to identify the extent to which academic libraries treat student employment as a High-Impact Practice. Focusing on articles, books, and ACRL conference proceedings published from 1997 to 2017, 216 publications were reviewed. Utilizing the work of George Kuh as a framework, publications were coded so as to identify the characteristics of highly effective educational practices demonstrated in each publication's student employment program. Findings show that student employment programs consistently align with High-Impact Practices in regards to faculty and peer interaction, time, and effort; we also found gaps in the student employment literature regarding professional development and training, mentoring, diversity, and the transferability of work experiences to other contexts. Further research is needed to articulate the impact student employment has on student success.

Introduction

Student employment plays a critical role in subsidizing the costs of higher education. Students shoulder significant costs to attend college and each year costs continue to rise. In 2015–2016, the cost of attending a postsecondary institution (including tuition and fees, books and supplies, room, board, and other expenses) for on-campus students ranged from \$14,300 (public, 2-year institution) to \$47,400 (private non-profit, 4-year institutions). For public 4-year institutions, 2015–2016 tuition and fees increased 6% over 2012–2013 costs (NCES, 2017a). Many students receive financial aid to help offset the costs of college attendance, including Federal Work-Study (FWS) funding. According to the 2011–2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 6% of undergraduate students have FWS jobs to finance their education, earning an average of \$2300 (Radwin, Wine, Siegel, & Bryan, 2013). This data does not include students that do not qualify for financial aid or FWS and must work full or part time to afford college. In 2015, 43% of full-time and 78% of part-time undergraduate students worked (NCES, 2017b).

The work experiences of undergraduate students can also shape their college experiences and contribute to the development of skills employers seek in college graduates. A study conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that employers value employees who have real-world experiences and applications

while they are in college. 60% of employers “think that having both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge that apply to a variety of fields is important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success at their company” (Hart Research Associates, 2015, p. 2). This data suggests that it is important for undergraduate students to gain practical experience, critical thinking skills, and diverse perspectives, as well as develop teamwork, communication, and leadership skills. With employers expecting new college graduates to be adept at far more than what they learn in their coursework, student employment can assist in preparing them for future professional success.

With nearly half of all students working in some capacity as undergraduates, student employment is a crucial feature of higher education in terms of both financial support and student development. Academic libraries traditionally employ students to work part time (in 2016, 1406 libraries reported employing students), and therefore have the potential to contribute in both of these areas (ACRL, 2016). If student employment is prevalent in academic libraries, it raises the question: Are academic libraries capitalizing on this ready workforce, not just to meet staffing needs, but also to truly engage and develop these students? Do academic libraries treat student employment as a transactional necessity or as an opportunity to impact student success?

In order to investigate student employment in academic libraries, the authors of this study completed a systematic literature review

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aimed at exploring the following research question: to what extent, as evidence in the literature, do academic libraries treat student employment as a High-Impact Practice?

Literature review

Student employment and student success

Is student employment an important factor in student success? It might seem that working, while essential for financial reasons, could be a possible detriment to academic success—that work and studies could be competing goals. Several studies, however, have found that on-campus student employment can enhance student retention and success. A study that examined first-year college student employees found a strong correlation between students' grades and if they worked on campus for 20 h a week or less. Students who worked on campus for 20 h or less had the same grades as students who did not work at all, while students who worked off campus and more than 20 h each week had significantly lower grades (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008; 2009).

In a similar vein, a report that examined literature related to college student success argued that “on-campus, or work-study, employment is more often associated with student success, since working on campus provides a channel of communication to students and helps students use the educational system effectively.” (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 25). This is particularly true for upper-division students, especially when their student employment positions relate to their post-college career goals. Indeed, students who worked part time in positions related to their academic disciplines or desired careers had more positive experiences with securing post-college employment. Notably, the “practical competence domain” (including time management, decision making), was especially important (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 86). The report also noted that students of color especially reaped the rewards of the opportunities provided by part-time student employment.

Kane, Healy, and Henson (1992) studied factors that led to college students' satisfaction with their part-time jobs. A random group of 5350 undergraduate students (1438 of whom responded) were surveyed about their employment experiences. Findings indicated that students who worked in positions that were congruent with their desired post-college occupation and/or skill set experienced higher job satisfaction in these part-time roles.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) synthesized twenty years of research on the impact of college on students. Regarding the impact that employment has on persistence and educational attainment, on-campus part-time employment was found to have a positive impact on “year-to-year persistence, bachelor's degree completion, timely graduation, and the probability of enrolling in graduate or professional school” (Pascarella and Terenzini, p. 407) while full- or part-time off-campus employment had an overwhelmingly negative effect.

These studies suggest that part-time employment on campus can contribute to student retention and academic success, but not just any kind of student employment. Students need to feel as though they are working in positions that are relevant to their career aspirations or that contribute to transferable and practical competencies. Student employment positions in academic libraries may not seem directly related to the post-college employment goals of many students, but the opportunity exists to make explicitly clear to student employees that they are gaining important skills that will benefit them after they graduate. If academic libraries treat student employment positions as opportunities for students to make gains in critical thinking, leadership, time management, communication, and any number of soft skills, students can achieve greater satisfaction with their campus jobs. By also helping

students to articulate how their work can transfer to other contexts, academic libraries deliberately contribute to their academic success and retention.

Student employment as a High-Impact Practice

How can librarians devise and implement student employment programs that contribute to student success initiatives? We argue that student employment can be framed in terms of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) High-Impact Practices, which are established educational activities that “increase rates of student retention and student engagement” (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). The High-Impact Practices identified by AAC&U consist of first-year seminars or first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2008). Student employment, it should be noted, is not one of the High-Impact Practices in and of itself, but student-centered employment programs have the potential to align with these best practices if they share the characteristics that make the High-Impact Practices so powerful (Rinto, Watts, & Mitola, 2017b). In establishing AAC&U's High-Impact Practices, George Kuh also identified six characteristics that these practices share, characteristics that make them highly effective. These consist of:

- i. Time and effort: High-Impact Practices should require that students “devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks” (Kuh, 2008, p. 14). In the context of student employment, this means that students should be engaged in substantive work tasks that further the mission of the library (and students should be aware of how they are contributing); students should also be highly trained, retained in their position, and asked to think about their professional development and future goals (Rinto et al., 2017b).
- ii. Faculty and peer interaction: Highly effective educational practices should involve extended contact with peers and faculty (Kuh, 2008). These can encompass the relationship between the supervisor and the student employee, opportunities for mentoring via the supervisor or other professional library employees, and/or training and working alongside other students in a mediated peer-learning environment (Rinto et al., 2017b).
- iii. Diversity: The third characteristic that High-Impact Practices share is a commitment to diversity. Kuh argues that “participating in one or more of these activities increases the likelihood that students will experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves” (Kuh, 2008, p. 15). Student employment programs can intentionally foster diversity through recruiting diverse student employees (including diversity of experiences and socio-economic status), as well as through assigning work tasks that encourage student employees to engage with other students, faculty, and staff from different backgrounds (Rinto et al., 2017b).
- iv. Formal and informal feedback: Kuh writes that “though the structures and settings of high-impact activities differ, students typically get frequent feedback about their performance in every one....because students perform in close proximity to supervisors or peers, feedback is almost continuous” (Kuh, 2008, p. 17). In the context of student employment, supervisors can build in both formal measures of feedback (performance reviews, annual evaluations), and informal measures (on-the-fly feedback received by working side-by-side). There are other opportunities, as well—supervisors can provide opportunities for students to receive and/or provide feedback from their colleagues (peer-to-peer feedback, or from other library staff), as well as facilitate self-reflective activities, in which students

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