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The Benefits and Challenges of Working in an Academic Library: A Study of Student Library Assistant Experience

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ABSTRACT

Many college students choose or need to work, and academic libraries offer a potentially convenient on-campus location for employment. Students serving in these roles may benefit from the experience both academically and socially. By examining students' experience as workers in the library, academic libraries have the opportunity to understand the benefits that such work might provide and intentionally plan to enhance learning and demonstrate library value in a novel way. This basic qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of student assistants working in an academic library and identify the benefits and challenges they perceived as a result of enacting the role. Individual interviews were conducted with seven undergraduate student library assistants at a doctoral-granting institution to determine benefits and challenges they noted that resulted from their experiences in this student employment role, and findings reveal opportunities for academic librarians in training and supervising student employees.

Introduction

As the emphasis on student learning in all areas of colleges and universities continues, offices, programs and services increasingly will be held accountable for providing intentional learning experiences to students in contexts that seem obvious for learning (such as classrooms) as well as arenas where learning may seem less apparent (for example, dining halls). Accrediting bodies for higher education expect all facets of the institution to contribute to student learning and libraries are increasingly being called upon to document their value and contributions to student retention and success (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 6). Academic libraries appear to be environments that contribute to student learning, yet this contribution may be considered as primarily stemming from the provision of spaces for learning as opposed to offering intentional experiences that result in students having increased knowledge or skills (Kuh & Gonyea, 2003).

One way that libraries can contribute in very intentional ways to student learning is through their student employment program. Whether out of need or choice, college students often are employed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Studies show that working while in college can have both positive and negative impacts on student academic success, but working on campus seems to offer the most potential for positive results for students and the university whose purpose it is to train them (Pusser, 2010). Working on-campus, such as in a campus

library, may provide some specific benefits to students; Astin (1993) reported that on-campus student employees are likely to benefit from greater contact with other students as well as potentially having increased contact with faculty because they work on-campus. Additionally, these on-campus jobs offer opportunities for active involvement in the college/university community, also deemed valuable (Astin, 1984). As a result, exploration of the various campus employment roles, such as student library assistant positions, is of use to those who employ student workers. Academic libraries have long provided flexible, convenient employment opportunities for student workers and have in turn benefited enormously from their contributions.

While most studies of student employees in libraries identify the benefits to the library, this study sought to learn more about the impact of the student employee experience on the student. Do library student employees perceive the library work environment as beneficial? If so, what is it about these environments that leads to these benefits and what conditions are perceived negatively? Libraries who ask these questions and intentionally plan for the best outcomes may add to library value and contribute to institutional accreditation expectations through the creation of work environments that also promote student learning outcomes. This study of undergraduate student workers in a mid-sized public university library inquired about students' experiences of working in an academic library to better understand those experiences as a basis of intentionally planning for improved student as well

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as employer outcomes.

Literature review

Since the 1880s, professional publications have indicated that employing student workers was a “widespread” practice in libraries (White, 1985). For decades writers have noted that student assistants were critical to the library's ability to provide a broad range of services, but also that they brought something unique to library work that could not be provided by permanent employees (Frank, 1984). Traditionally charged mainly with the mundane tasks of shelving and checking out books, more recently student assistants have taken on more challenging and enriching tasks such as providing reference assistance, offering educational support to peers, promoting the library through their social networks, and helping permanent library employees effectively use new technologies, such as the newest social media (Adeogun, 2016; Marks & Gregory, 1995; Maxey-Harris, Cross, & McFarland, 2010; Michael & McGinniss, 2013; Rinto, Watts, & Mitola, 2017; Salomon, 2013; Stanfield & Palmer, 2011; White, 1985; Wu, 2003). The result is a new academic library world where student employees are “partners” and “collaborators” (Walton, 2010, p. 118) and are offered opportunities for “deep participation” in library work (Han, Wang, & Luo, 2014, p. 467).

Given library dependence upon these employees, it is not surprising that library publications often offer advice on how to motivate, manage, train, and assess library student assistants. Such publications have taken the form of book length manuals providing outlines for all aspects of management of student assistants (Baldwin, 1990; Baldwin & Barkley, 2007), articles providing advice on how students could be used in new ways, including in more expansive and challenging roles, or offering new methods to work with them most effectively (Connell & Mileham, 2006; Michael & McGinniss, 2013; O'Neil & Comley, 2010; Wu, 2003).

Most often, the primary focus of these publications is sharing information related to providing effective and efficient library services. The focus of our study is how library work impacts student experience, and far less writing has focused on measuring the impact of working in the library on student employees' academic success, retention, and career potential and in understanding the student worker experience. Such a connection does seem likely and is undoubtedly assumed by many. General studies have found a positive correlation between college student success and part-time employment, particularly when that employment is academically or career related, on-campus, and limited to 10–15 h a week (Aper, 1994; Noel-Levitz, 2010). This aptly describes most library student worker positions. The exact connection between on campus work and student success is not clear though, and it appears that though on campus student employment can have large benefits, not all work is equally beneficial (Pusser, 2010).

The impact of working in the library on students, and how libraries can intentionally plan for successful outcomes, has not remained entirely unexplored. Wilder (1990) argued that library employment placed students in a social and academic environment which had the potential to improve retention among them. In a 2003 article, Baird argued that trainers of student workers could have a larger educational impact on these employees if they offered students training beyond that necessary to learn the tasks at hand and provided general guidance in work place rules. Such instruction, she argued, would improve job performance of students but also assist them in their academic work and ready them for careers beyond college.

Logan (2012) argued library employment helped student workers build skills and improve self-confidence. Wu (2003) assumed a link between library work and career success in an article urging employers to adopt a “win-win” attitude towards working with Library and Information Science graduate assistants by emphasizing how work in the library enhances student employee career potential. While her article dealt with graduate students, undergraduate students are also likely to benefit from reflection on the learning outcomes obtained from library employment as suggested by Baird (2003).

Some studies have reported that library student workers perceive library work experience as having a positive impact. Students surveyed by Walker and Flitsos (1992) felt they benefited from the flexible schedules offered by library work, suggesting some link to academic success. Zink, Medaille, Mundt, Colegrove, and Aldrich (2010) found students felt that library work experience supported their academic work and seemed likely to assist them in the development of workplace skills, including those related to the use of technology, customer service, and working in teams. Weston's (2008) qualitative study found that students reported library work helped them to integrate into college life in many ways, including learning about library resources they would need for classes, interacting with professors at public service desks, and meeting other students. Jacobson and Shuyler (2013) also surveyed and interviewed current and former student workers on their perceptions of the impact that working in the library had on them socially, psychologically, and academically. Their data indicated that students felt working in the library had many positive impacts in the areas of academic and social life, as well as career development, and few negative impacts. McCoy (2011) surveyed former student library employees and found the overwhelming majority (82%) felt working in the library “increased their academic success.”

Two studies measured the academic performance of library student workers and compared them with their cohorts at the same institution. Folk (2014) found that library student workers scored higher on both pre- and post-information literacy tests than similar students not employed in the library. McCoy (2011) found library employees had higher GPAs than the average for their class.

Researchers from libraries where students were given challenging responsibilities and professional development training found students perceived the opportunities positively. Holliday and Nordgren (2005) surveyed students employed as library peer mentors at the reference desk and in the classroom. As part of their training, peer mentors attended formal library instruction sessions and they were tasked with offering training sessions to peers and even librarians. Students reported that their work experience had resulted in improved reference skills, which positively impacted academic work, and also that they appreciated the increased responsibilities provided by the positions. The peers even suggested that all peer trainers should be required to offer a peer training session each semester because teaching someone else was the “best way to learn” (p. 283). More recently, Melilli, Mitola, and Hunsaker (2016) offered student employees a formal and extensive professional development program. Students who participated overwhelmingly reported these workshops were useful and felt that they would assist them in the future in their academic work and in potential future employment. Librarians who reworked student library employees' job titles and descriptions to better reflect skills developed through library work and offered career development educational sessions on topics such as resume writing, found students reported the development of skills “aligning with liberal education learning goals” (Markgraf, 2015, p. 755). Mestre and Lecrone (2015) studied student employees who participated in a program which offered them increased leadership opportunities. They found students welcomed the increased responsibility and felt that they gained skills that would help them in their career paths. Similarly, Buell and Hagman (2016) described how students working in library outreach positions who were allowed to set their own learning goals, and asked to reflect upon their learning, achieved higher learning outcomes and an understanding of how library employment helped them build workplace skills.

Libraries, often regarded as the academic heart of colleges and universities, may provide work environments even more likely to provide academic and social benefits for students. While most research has addressed benefits to the libraries due to employing students, fewer studies have addressed the benefits identified by the student employees themselves. This study seeks to highlight students' perceptions of their experiences as library employees.

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