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Getting the Most Out of Your Student Worker Budget: A Survey of Tasks Performed by Student Assistants in Access Services Departments

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Survey Participants

❑ 95 libraries completed the web-based survey after a call for participants had been sent to the Lib-Circplus@Princeton.edu mailing list.

❑ 66% of the participants were at university libraries and 34% were at college libraries.

❑ Participants were drawn from 32 states and 1 Canadian province.

❑ 46 % of participants worked at institutions serving 0-5,000 students; 22% served 5,001-10,000; 6 % served 10,001-15,000; 4 % served 15,000-20,000; and 17% served more than 20,001 students.

❑ 71% employed both regular paid student assistants and work study students while 9% employed only regular paid student assistants and 20% employed only work study students.

Discussion Questions

Q. How much are student assistants paid?
❑ 51% of participating libraries paid student assistants more than minimum wage with 49% reporting they pay only minimum wage.

Q. Would your department give up student assistants in exchange for adding another full-time staff member(s)?
❑ 74% of respondents indicated they would NOT give up student assistants in exchange for hiring more full-time staff.

Q. Student Assistants are worth the investment in terms of training and supervision for the returns that are provided?
❑ 97% of participants indicated they viewed student assistants as worth the investment in terms of training and supervision.

Q. Overall the job performance of student assistants is:
❑ 71% of respondents thought the job performance of student assistants was Good and 22% rated it as Excellent. Only 6% thought the job performance was Fair and only one participant indicated Poor.

Survey Results

Standard Core Tasks

28 tasks were identified as daily or weekly tasks assigned to student assistants by 50% or more of the participants:

❑ Check out/renew/discharge library materials (97.8%)
❑ Shelve stacks and periodicals collections (94.7%)
❑ Sort and preshelve materials for shelving (93.6%)
❑ Shelve other collections (media, unbound periodicals, reserves) (92.6%)
❑ Answer directional/informational questions for patrons (ex. where is computer lab); explain general library policies) (91.5%)
❑ Answer telephone at the service desk (90.4%)
❑ Tidy/straighten Stacks and other collections (85.1%)
❑ Shelf-reading (automated or physical) (85.1%)
❑ Assist staff with opening/closing building (76.5%)
❑ Check out/discharge interlibrary loan materials for patrons (74.5%)
❑ Retrieve items from book drop (72.8%)
❑ Light tidying of building (push in chairs; pick-up trash; dust) (72.3%)
❑ Help patrons find items on shelves (70.2%)
❑ Search for books and other items (missing, lost, claimed returned) (68.1%)
❑ Pull books and other items for interlibrary loan (68.1%)
❑ Maintain equipment (ex. refill paper for computers, photocopiers, coin) (68.1%)
❑ Assist patrons with using photocopiers (66%)
❑ Building pick-ups (65.2%)
❑ Oversee library detection gates and respond to alarms (62.4%)
❑ Accept reserves items from faculty for processing by staff (58.1%)
❑ Photocopy ILL article requests (56.5%)
❑ Accept payment of library fines/fees (56.4%)
❑ Record statistics (ex. gate count) (55.9%)
❑ Accept lost items from patrons (55.3%)
❑ Answer specific questions (ex. explain details of library fines to a patron) (53.8%)
❑ Assist patrons with using computers and printing (53.8%)
❑ Pick/unpack ILL shipments (53.3%)
❑ Sign out equipment to patrons (digital cameras) (51.1%)

Standard Non-Core Tasks

A further 28 tasks were identified as tasks assigned to student assistants by 50% or more of the participants but on a less than daily or weekly basis:

❑ Shifting (86.2%)
❑ General departmental photocopying and collating (76.1%)
❑ Retrieve library materials from open stacks for patrons (75.0%)
❑ Stuff and address envelopes (73.4%)
❑ Clean equipment (computers, microfilm units, monitors) (73.4%)
❑ Student assistants independently operate public service desks (without direct staff supervision) (73.1%)
❑ Assist patrons with using microform units (70.2%)
❑ Data entry (ex. typing to input data into a database) (66.3%)
❑ Assist with emergencies (fire alarms, evacuation of building) (66.0%)
❑ Clean stacks and books (dust or vacuum) (65.6%)
❑ Maintain and organize Lost and Found (64.9%)
❑ Senior student assistants formally train new student assistants (62.4%)
❑ Review and suggest changes to library procedures (60.2%)
❑ Add tattle tape to materials (59.6%)
❑ Provide change to the patrons (photocopiers) (58.9%)
❑ Accept completed items requests forms from patrons (interlibrary loan form, storage retrieval) (58.5%)
❑ Add new library patrons to library system (community patrons) or issue new patron cards (58.5%)
❑ Update existing patron records in library system (ex. new address) (57.4%)
❑ Sort and maintain new books display (57.0%)
❑ Add holds and recalls of items (56.4%)
❑ Pack OCLC/ILL mail and shipments (52.9%)
❑ Senior student assistants formally supervise other student assistants (52.1%)
❑ Communicate (telephone; email) with patrons on circulation related issues (52.1%)
❑ Search online catalog or library databases for needed citations for patrons or ILL (52.1%)
❑ Process and send ILL articles electronically, fax, mail (51.6%)
❑ Respond to problem patrons in the building (51.1%)
❑ Independently supervise operation of library detection gates (without direct staff supervision)? (50.0%)
❑ Process the physical ILL books and items (50.0%)

Unique Tasks

Interesting tasks assigned to student workers by less than 50% of participants:

❑ Open/close building without staff assistance
❑ Staff security gates at exits
❑ Deliver/retrieve library materials to faculty/departments across campus
❑ Supervise special rooms (library lounge, art gallery, music listening room)
❑ Reference service
❑ Scan documents
❑ Reserves processing
❑ Book displays
❑ Run errands
❑ Circulation billing
❑ Occasional foreign language translation
❑ Coordinate copyright permissions

Very Unique Tasks

❑ Water plants
❑ "Feed library fish and clean out tank if willing"

And finally

❑ "Other duties as assigned"

Introduction

Academic libraries invest considerable funds and staff time in the hiring, training, and supervising of student assistants. Access Services departments within academic libraries depend on student assistants to complete tasks and aid in the work flow in virtually all areas of the department. With the recent increases in minimum wage and uncertain library budgets, the need for the most efficient and effective use of student assistants has become an even greater concern.

This poster session presents the results of a recently conducted web-based survey of Access Services department supervisors. The survey that was completed by 94 academic libraries asked 85 questions regarding specific circulation tasks and the frequency their student assistants performed these tasks. In addition, the survey asked participants to provide background information about their student assistant program and respond to discussion questions about the quality of the job performance of student assistants. The most interesting feedback generated by the survey was the comments section that allowed participants to elaborate on their view of the utility and approach needed in managing student assistants.

Comments on Student Assistants Drawn from Survey

❑ "About 15% of our student assistants are 'Fabulous' meaning they are more knowledgeable and productive than the permanent staff."

❑ "Every year I have one or two students who prove themselves excellent, but I also have a student every two years or so who doesn't work out at all, so I suppose it evens out as 'good'."

❑ "Our Student Assistants do the bare minimum."

❑ "Generally our student assistants are excellent workers. They bring enthusiasm and a sense of fun to our department. Their technical skills are great. All of our student employees do excellent work, but our student shelvers are amazing workers."

❑ "One of my favorite parts of my job is working with the student workers. Sure sometimes they can be frustrating, but for the most part they are a vital part of the library, without whom we couldn't be open as much or get as much done."

❑ "Generally student assistants do a very good job. There are of course times when they won't do a job like a full time staff or a professional would, but overall they do very well."

❑ "Only problem with quality of job performance is attendance. Work isn't as much of a priority for them as school, sports, or socializing, so there is a tendency to skip shifts, especially towards finals."

❑ "We wouldn't be open on the weekends without the student workers."

❑ "Some years its great some bad. We have student assistants right now that we are quite happy with leaving them in charge. Others--I should have just done the job myself. Some, of course, are better than others. The really good ones help make up for the ones who are so-so in their work performance."

❑ "Our students do a great job. We really depend on them to cover a lot of hours at our checkout desk and lots of weekends and nights."

❑ "Students generally provide very good customer service. Job attendance seems to be a persistent problem area."

❑ "Students tend to vary greatly in terms of retention and skills, which is the major drawback to hiring them, but the amount of skill and effort from the really good students more than makes up for the ones who don't work out."

❑ "The 'good' rating is due to the mix of poor to excellent that we all experience!"

❑ "They come good and bad, but mostly good. The bad weed themselves out. We have actually reduced our number of students and made full and part time regular positions because despite most of them being good, we prefer a more consistent presence, one that can be here during exams, etc."

❑ "Usually great workers who stay until they graduate."

❑ "We can't provide good service without them!"

❑ "We could not run the Access Services Department without the student assistants."

❑ "Students who are under pressure because of their heavy academic workload are encouraged to leave."

❑ "While student assistants are wonderful they do require a great deal of training and the turn over requires frequent training. It is crucial to put together a strong training program if you have a large pool or are dependant on student staffing."

❑ "Sophomores and juniors make the best library assistants - freshmen are too immature and seniors lose enthusiasm for such positions."

❑ "Majority of them catch on quick and do a great job. Sometimes you just guess wrong and hire the wrong person, and if they don't shape up, you let them go."

❑ "While there are always a few "false starts" when you hire new students to work in the library, our goal is to hire early and keep them as long as they are in school. Our most recent graduates were an exceptional group, and we would have let them stay forever."

❑ "We have MANY jobs formerly performed by staff that are now handled by students, such as Reserves processing and faculty communication, cataloging, interlibrary loan lending and borrowing procedures, etc."

❑ "It would be impossible to efficiently run the library without student assistants (Except during midterms, finals, between semesters, and a month before they graduate when their brains seem to turn off)."

❑ "Student staff assists regular staff with nearly all library duties. We are very fortunate to have such great students!"

❑ "For the majority of the students we hire there is so much training and retraining that it is exhausting."

❑ "I find they rise to expectations when well-trained and motivated which is a challenge for the supervisor!"

❑ "It all seems to come down to attitude. If they have an attitude that it is important to do a good job they do. If they are just putting in the time it is hard to get any work out of them."

❑ "Like any worker at any level, how the students are treated and paid usually determines how well they'll perform. Additionally, with some you strike gold, others, well.... not so much."

❑ "Many issues I have personally experienced with student employees were alleviated by our department by us creating clearer guidelines for our expectations and job responsibilities for student workers."

❑ "Most students do a good job providing they are provided comprehensive and systematic training as soon as they are hired. We give them a list of expectations and information (lots of it!)."
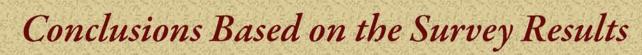
❑ "It would be wonderful to have all full or part time employees but since that is not possible due to budget constraints, we do our best to hire good students."

❑ "Student employee's work is as good as the training and supervision they receive."

❑ "Their performance tends to rise with our expectations. Students at night who are only expected to be warm bodies at the desk do little else. Students we instruct in problem solving tend to excel and become reliable employees."

❑ "We currently are using student evaluation forms to discuss job performance with our students."

❑ "Student assistant success depends on the time and attention given to not just training and follow-up, but on social attention given by supervisors. Student assistants who work for supervisors interested in their general well-being do much better than those who are ignored or considered to be there just for work."

Conclusions Based on the Survey Results

Suggestions on how to use student assistants most effectively:

❑ Use senior student assistants to help in the training of new student assistants. Over 60% of respondents regularly use senior student assistants to help with the training and 52% use senior student assistants to supervise their newer colleagues. This could be expanded to other libraries. Having knowledgeable and trusted returning student assistants assigned to assist in training and supervision would free up staff time for other tasks as well as contribute to a greater sense of being part of the team on the part of the student assistants.

❑ Spend less time training. Many survey participants pointed out the number of hours spent training student assistants can be costly, time consuming, and draining on the staff members. One participant commented, "Because shifts are relatively short -- 2-3 hours – it takes a long time to train student assistants. For us, it takes about 20 hours for a student assistant to be minimally competent at the front desk. Half the term is over by that time." Other respondents commented, "[There] is a lot of training for a lot of students for little time spent working" and "Due to limited work schedules retention of work knowledge can be a challenge." To make the most of the investment of time spent on training, a new approach could be to target the training of student assistants to the core duties they will be performing, think of it as a top ten. Rather than have the student assistants attempt to master all the details of the department at once, they could be initially trained on the basic duties and then, if time permits, take on more responsibility as the year progresses. This will ensure trained student assistants can begin contributing to the department sooner and also spread the training process out over the year, thus relieving staff fatigue.

❑ Monetarily reward good student assistants. In a time of uncertain library budgets, it would be a radical approach to pay the student assistants more per hour. However, more than half of the institutions surveyed pay more than minimum wage and offer raises for experience and skills. One survey participant commented that "It's been my experience that the student assistants, who truly care about their job, & doing a good job, are those who are TRULY surviving on their own .... Those students need to make more than minimum wage," while another remarked "A lot of the problem is, some don't view their job as a "real job" since it's not 40 hours with benefits." Introducing raises for good student assistants would provide motivation for higher job performance and introduce the framework of a "real job" to the relationship. Spending funds on fewer good student assistants could be worthwhile; as opposed to spending the same funds on more mediocre assistants all earning the same amount of money.