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Student employment in Portland area academic libraries: A preliminary report

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Student employees can be the most frustrating and rewarding employees to supervise in academic libraries. There is a wealth of information written about student employees, but nothing specific to the Portland metropolitan area. To gather information about student employment, a survey was sent that asked questions about use of student workers in libraries: Where and when do they work? Who supervises them? What type of training do the students receive? What wages and benefits are paid?

Student Employment in Portland Area Academic Libraries: A Preliminary Report

by Linda Johnson
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This is a preliminary report of the findings. A more completed analysis will be available Summer 1997.

Surveys were sent to libraries in the Oregon State System of Higher Education, the Portland Area Library System, and other academic libraries in the Portland Metropolitan area. Of 26 surveys sent out 54 percent or 14 surveys were returned.

Of the responding schools 64 percent were public and 36 percent private. The majority of

the institutions offer general academic studies. Three community colleges, three medical schools, one research and one religious school answered the questionnaire. School enrollments range from 383 at Western States Chiropractic College to 30,000 enrolled at PCC.

The number of students employed varied from two at OGI to 75 at SOSC. The average total hours of student work per week reported by the survey is 363 hours. PCC, counting all three campus libraries, uses the most with about 2,200 hours and OGI uses the smallest amount at 22 hours per week. Individual students work between four and 40 hours per week, depending on which department of the library they are assigned. There appears to be no correlation between the number of regular staff and the number of student workers. The number of students working is based more on the size of the collection, the hours the library is open, and what kind of jobs the students are hired to perform.

Student workers are an integral part of the library. Without them the library could not offer the open hours and the accessibility of the collection to its clientele. "On one hand student workers in the 1990's do much more than keep our buildings open and our service desk staffed. They actually allow us to offer innovative reference, instruction and outreach services to previously unreachable (or at least difficult-to-reach) clientele." (Gregory, 1995)

Student workers also free up time for the regular staff to do the more detailed and intense work and policy making. Students are inexpensive to hire and there usually is a large pool from which to draw applicants. Most of the libraries surveyed only hire students from their own school. OHSU hires students from other schools because the medical, dental, and nursing students do not usually have time to work between classes and clinics.

Requirements for work as a student assistant in libraries range from a person who can work the hours needed, to detailed listings of knowledge and skills requested for specific jobs. Technical services, computer support, office help, and reference work all demand skilled and knowledgeable workers. Some of the skills requested are communication skills, computer knowledge, good language skills, detail orientation, accuracy, good customer relations, and flexibility.

Recruitment is often done by word of mouth. Students already working at the library tell their friends and classmates about the job openings at the library. Libraries also post position openings around campus, at the financial affairs office, at the student employment office, in student newspapers, and in the library. SOSC sends letters to incoming freshmen announcing job openings.

Work-study grants are one of the main reasons students are inexpensive to use. These grants pay 75 percent of the salaries. The library picks up the other 25 percent. There are some drawbacks attached to using work study students. The amount of the grant limits the number of hours and the length of employment for the students. Salaries are usually set by the financial department of the school. Employee turnover can be high with this pool of employees. Many schools using 50 percent or more work study students report the length of employment at one year or less for work study students. Non-work study students' average length of employment was mentioned at two to three years.

Student employees are considered temporary, short-time employees. Working in the library is not their main focus. Their focus is getting an education; this is one reason they can sometimes be difficult to work with. According to the survey, the incidence of "the flu" at midterm and finals time always goes up. Additionally, they are unavailable during school breaks. Work schedules cannot be written in concrete because they can change from day to day and week to week. The average number of hours worked in a week is 10. This can affect the training and retention of library policies because the students do not work long enough to make the work routine.

Student workers are supervised by a variety of library employees. Paraprofessional employees do 66 percent of the supervising, librarians 17 percent, managers 11 percent, students and others 1 percent.

LIBRARY DEPARTMENTS USING STUDENT EMPLOYEES

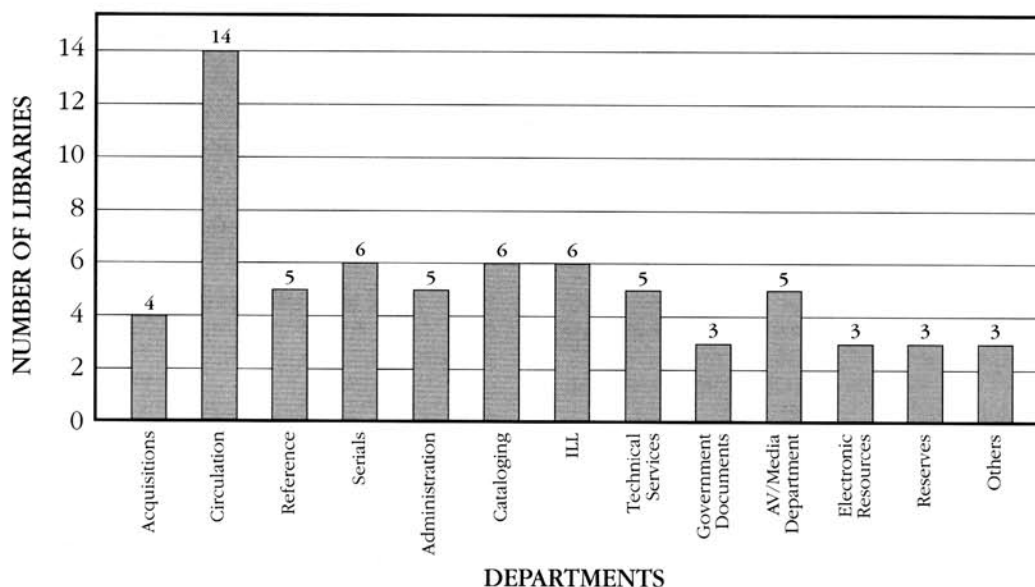


Figure 1

In the not-so-long-ago past the only jobs the students were assigned were shelving, shelf-reading, and staffing the circulation desk in the evenings and weekends. Today, because of budget cuts and the increase in computer technology, students are working in all departments of the library and doing all types of jobs. Besides the tasks already listed, some of the jobs students are doing are processing books, maintaining computers, supervising other students, assisting patrons with computer problems, answering reference questions, and processing document delivery requests and acquisition documents. This is not a complete list because students' job assignments change all the time.

Some libraries pay their students at the same salary range. Other libraries craft the compensation to correspond to skill levels and technical aspects of the job. For example, students working in computer labs are paid more than those shelving books. Salaries fluctuate from \$4.90 (Clark) to \$9.30 (WOSC). Raises are determined in several ways depending on the institution. Performance, longevity, skills and level of responsibility are the main reasons for increasing salaries. For some libraries the school administration or the government determine salary policies. Benefits are few. OIT student workers' fines are forgiven, pizza and treats are given every term at MHCC, and OHSU offers free bus passes. No library offers insurance or vacation benefits.

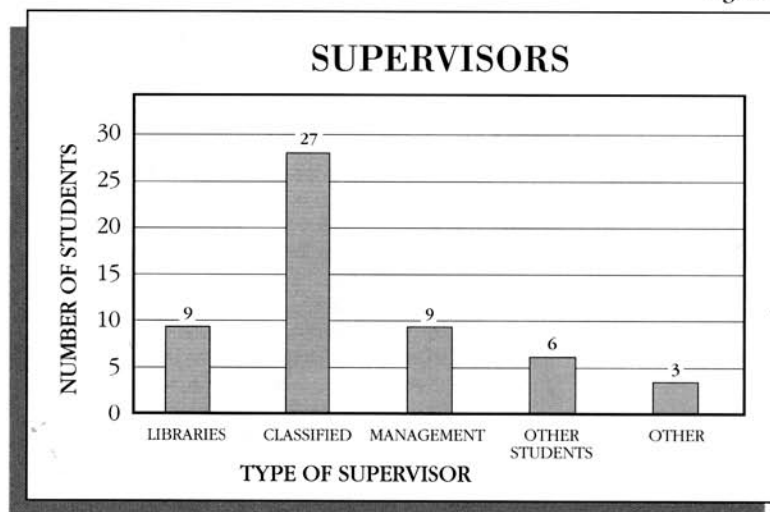
The training students receive depends on the department of the library for which they work. A lot of training is done on the job, under fire. This is partly because of the time element. There is no time to

train, everyone is too busy just trying to do his or her regular job. Another reason is because students are perceived to be short time employees, "low man on the totem pole" and not worth the effort of intense training. Sometimes training is delegated to staff members and other students who have not been instructed in training techniques or in communicating the goals of the library.

The result is a pool of employees who do not understand their role in the library and perceive their job

See Student Employment page 19

Figure 2



Student Employment

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as busy work and unimportant. "An average student aide needs at least two months of work training before he/she starts performing quite efficiently." (Frank, 1984). Has the increase of computer technology in libraries since 1984 extended or shortened the learning curve for student workers? This is a question that could be investigated. Computers and videos could be used as training tools for students. They could be developed as tutorial programs that are always available for training and review.

Students receive training in public awareness, the libraries' call number systems, computer systems used by the library, other computer software, phone etiquette, reference and circulation duties, shelving, shelf reading and other task-appropriate instructions. The amount and variety of training depends on the library that employs the students. Only three libraries reported having student manuals available for training and communicating with the students. Another three libraries hold orientation sessions for new student employees that last from one to four hours.

Student workers are an important part of operating libraries. How we train, recruit, compensate, and allocate students is an essential part in improving the library's service to our clientele.

For more information about student employees in academic libraries, I suggest reading Susan Marks

and David Gregory's annotated bibliography "Student Employment in Academic Libraries: Recommended Readings and Resources," published in the *Journal of Library Administration*.

The surveys received have been very interesting and informative. If you would like to add your library to the research findings please contact me at OHSU library: (503) 494-3220 or johnsnli@ohsu.edu. ☐

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Freedom

(continued from page 15)

A friend and colleague, Katherine Stevens of Portland Community College, had an experience that led me to select the opening line of this article. In her library they had a display, sponsored by their campus gay and lesbian club, featuring materials available on gays and lesbians, such as literature, sociology and psychology texts. A couple approached Stevens and asked why this display was in the library.

Stevens listened carefully to their concerns and informed them of PCC library's selection and display policies. She offered them the library's suggestion form and referred them on to a reference librarian. Because Stevens recognized their right to have concerns and took the time to inform them of her

library's mission, which included protecting intellectual freedom, the situation was quickly defused. She was prepared, informed, and confident in her library's policies, mission, and philosophy. Because of this, the patrons took no further action.

This scenario is just one example that illustrates why it is important for your library to have policies in place that address intellectual freedom, as well as why you and your staff need to be well informed on the subject. If you do not know your library's policies and procedures, learn them. If they do not exist, start the wheels turning to get them established. It's a step that will make your work-life easier down the road, and ensure a better library for your patrons. ☐