

## Motivating and Retaining Student Assistants: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This paper offers specific recommendations for effectively motivating and retaining student employees at an academic library that practitioners may consider as they develop and implement programs for hiring, training, and retaining student assistants at their institutions. It describes a methodology that can be replicated for similar studies at other universities. This paper contributes new knowledge to the subject of academic library employee retention by reporting on the opinions of library student assistants at a small private liberal arts university in Southern California to gain insight into the kinds of retention program elements that students recommend. This study used an online survey to gather student feedback from student employees on the specific elements of our retention program that they see as critical to retaining them throughout their time on campus.

### Introduction

In recent years, our Access Services department at a small liberal arts college in Southern California has undergone significant transformations in its approach to managing student assistants. From informal and reactive practices prior to 2018, we have systematically implemented structured processes aimed at enhancing recruitment, training, and retention. This evolution has led to notable success in efficiency, consistency of service, and a retention rate of more than 90 percent year after year (not including graduates). The research presented here offers insights into our practices, direct feedback from students on which aspects of our Access Services program contribute to their motivation to do good work and return to the library each semester, and specific recommendations for motivating and retaining student assistants in similar departments and institutions.

Prior to 2018, processes for recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining student assistants in Access Services were informal and ad hoc. It was difficult to assess candidates for organizational fit (structural and cultural), and hiring and training processes absorbed a significant amount of staff time and were not aligned with best practices for hiring full-time staff. We spent most of our time reacting to problems rather than anticipating them. There were some gradual steps to alleviate these issues between 2012 and 2018. In 2012 and 2013, we designed

an interview guide to identify qualified candidates; all staff began attending annual Human Resources training in hiring and evaluating student assistants; and we began recruiting at an annual campus job fair, implemented a new training checklist to standardize training and improve efficiency, implemented new scheduling software, created a Student Assistant Handbook to set expectations and streamline onboarding, established an annual orientation event, and incorporated a post-training quiz. We continued to build on these new practices and policies between 2014 and 2018 by incorporating peer-training opportunities, dividing the training checklist into specific modules to enhance consistency, and making the orientation biannual (once each semester). Between 2014 and 2018, we also improved our retention practices by piloting a student assistant scholarship that was later endowed and began partnering with the Career Services Center on a library student assistant–specific workshop.

In 2018, we re-evaluated what had been implemented since 2014 and expanded on what was working. We updated the Student Assistant Handbook, added videos and self-guided building tour checklists to save staff time, and made reference training separate and interactive. Later, we added an interactive spring assessment quiz; created a Google Team Drive to better organize tools and documents needed for training; reduced staff time required per student from five to six hours to two to three hours; improved documentation; and updated and enhanced prior iterations of all checklists, modules, and processes.

As a result of all these changes, we noticed a positive impact on staff and student morale, consistency of service for our patrons, student work and evaluations, and retention rates. Between 2018 and 2023, our retention rates remained higher than 90 percent, including during the return to work in spring 2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic. The improvements in staff morale, service consistency, and high retention rates not only were a testament to our successful changes but also provided a strong foundation for sharing our approach with a broader audience. To this end, we presented at a virtual symposium in 2022 to share our successes with others. Our presentation focused on our philosophy that retention is a conscious effort from the start, the evidence that our best practices were effective, and detailed information about specific practices in three key areas: quality management (hiring, training, evaluating, flexible scheduling), supporting the whole student (acknowledgment, culture, feedback, empowerment, career readiness), and recognition (appreciation, scholarship, and others). In preparation for that presentation, we were able to look back and take a holistic view of the changes we implemented to improve efficiency, service, morale, and retention and realized we should investigate the specific elements of our program that encourage our student assistants to stay motivated and return each semester.

We hope this study will not only help us update and expand our best practices in hiring, training, motivating, and retaining student assistants in Access Services, but also outline specific recommendations that practitioners may consider as they develop their own student employee retention programs at other university libraries.

## Literature Review

Our review of the literature on motivating and retaining academic library student assistants found no studies surveying undergraduate student workers to better understand the specific aspects of their experience working at the library that contribute to retaining them through graduation and to get feedback on the measures they suggest to improve retention. Our study seeks to address this gap in the literature on retaining academic library student assistants by reporting on the results of a post-COVID-19 survey of undergraduate library student assistants at a small private liberal arts university in Southern California with the goal of providing insights into the key elements that an academic library's program for motivating and retaining student assistants should include.

The literature on academic library student assistants is extensive and dates to at least the 1930s with Jessie J. Smith's article in the spring 1930 issue of *Library Journal* in which she outlines the importance of properly hiring and training students to provide academic library services at Hiram College Library in Ohio (Smith 1930). Like Smith's article, much of the literature since has focused on effectively hiring and training students to provide quality library service. A smaller subset of the literature focuses on the question of what motivates and helps retain library student workers. These studies, in contrast to our study, do not offer insights directly from student assistants regarding what motivates them to work for the library. Michael and Jane Kathman's study, "Management Problems of Student Workers in Academic Libraries," suggests that an individual is motivated by their individual goals, and thus, library student workers will be more motivated to work for the library if their training provides clarity on the goals of the library and the important role that their work plays in achieving those goals (Kathman and Kathman 1978). Likewise, they suggest that the best way to achieve this is to divide training into two distinct parts: a general orientation and training on specific duties (Kathman and Kathman 1978, 121). This article provides a theoretical frame by which to understand student motivation. An article by Tammy Guerrero and Karen Corey at Purdue University Calumet explains how they designed a training program with the goal of retaining student assistants and outlines in detail the various elements of the training. They explain, "A

guiding principle is that when a person feels competent, responsible, and trusted, s/he will do a better job and want to remain in the department” (Guerrero and Corey 2003, 98). Their summary of the training program is excellent and highlights flexible scheduling as something they believe helps retain students. Joyce Salisbury’s article seeks to balance the need to make hiring students financially worthwhile with the need to ensure that the students we hire have a good experience that prepares them for life after college (Salisbury 2007). Salisbury outlines Central Michigan University’s process for hiring, training, communicating with, and motivating library student assistants and asserts that “a big reason for high turnover rates for library student staff members is that many of the jobs assigned to students are routine and can become boring with time” (Salisbury 2007, 4). Salisbury suggests that certain tasks, such as assisting with library instruction, motivates students by providing opportunities to develop skills relevant to their career path.

Nancy Lichten Adler’s article, “Retaining is Draining: Motivating Student Employees to High Performance and Longevity,” outlines activities and initiatives that Brigham Young University (BYU) has deployed to enhance staff commitment to the organization and improve performance and retention, as well as employee satisfaction overall (Adler 2008). At BYU, they rely on the theoretical frame of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and they use their semester-end evaluation process for students and staff to identify what staff and student workers want from their jobs, with the goal of developing successful initiatives and practices to enhance commitment, performance, and retention (Adler 2008, 94-95). They identified three broad areas of need as well as several general ideas to meet those needs, including social needs, which can be met with things like creating opportunities for teamwork and shared fun activities; self-esteem needs, which can be met with rewards for excellence, as well as public praise and recognition; and self-actualization needs, which can be met by providing opportunities to enhance skills and receive promotions (Adler 2008, 95). This article provides great ideas for retention and, like our study, seeks direct feedback from students. Our study is unique compared to the study completed at BYU in several ways. First, our study surveys only student employees using a standalone online survey rather than soliciting feedback from all staff and students as part of annual performance reviews. Second, our survey is not framed by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Although it does include specific questions related to current issues of concern that may or may not fall broadly into one of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, such as wellness, mental health, diversity, and inclusion. Finally, unlike Adler’s survey, our survey seeks to understand only what student employees identify as essential to retaining them. It is also noteworthy that our survey was conducted some 15 years later in a post-COVID environment.

Melissa Farr and Allyson Valentine's 2011 article focuses on their experiences hiring, training, and retaining student assistants at Harrisburg Area Community College (Farr and Valentine 2011). Their case study makes several of the same anecdotal observations we have made about retention and that our survey confirms, including the importance of having a systematic recruitment and interview process, a well-defined training process, flexible scheduling, projects based on individual interests, recognition opportunities, and student input on ways to meet organizational needs (Farr and Valentine 2011, 18-19).

Sara Smith and Quinn Galbraith's impressive study, "Motivating Millennials: Improving Practices in Recruiting, Retaining, and Motivating Younger Library Staff," surveyed more than 200 student assistants and more than 50 student worker supervisors at BYU's Lee Library in order to improve its practices in recruiting, motivating, and retaining "younger" library staff (Smith and Galbraith 2012, 137). No other study in the literature comes closer to ours than this one in terms of its method and central questions. Our study stands apart in that it focuses exclusively on what retains students at a small private liberal arts university and seeks feedback from students on the specific aspects of our program that they value. Unlike Smith and Galbraith, our study does not seek to understand generational differences that may influence student workers' motivations. However, it does survey a new generation of students and includes questions related to mental health, overall wellness, and diversity and inclusion. Smith and Galbraith's survey asked students to identify the top two factors that motivate them to stay at their library jobs; the top choice selected by 59 percent of those surveyed was flexibility, followed by proximity, which was selected by 43 percent of those surveyed (Smith and Galbraith 2012, 137). Our survey confirms that many students in 2023 remain motivated by flexibility.

Lorelei Sterling's article is unique in the literature up to 2015 in that it offers practical tips to motivate and retain student employees. Like so much of the literature on the question of what motivates and ensures retention of library student workers, Sterling's conclusions are based on her experience, rather than what students have shared about what motivates them to continue working for the library. Sterling outlines and explains six ways supervisors can motivate library student employees. These ideas are based on her experience successfully retaining student assistants at three libraries over several years up to 2015, as well as the literature on the subject up to 2015. They are autonomy for students to determine how work gets done, contests to motivate students, food, a suggestion box to gather student feedback, assigning tasks based on employee strengths, and participation in seasonal and university events (Sterling 2015, 123-125). Our survey expects to confirm the efficacy of many of these ideas for motivating students. Julia McKenna's 2020 review of the literature on library student training outlines six ways to

effectively train student workers, including a focus on employee retention (McKenna 2020, 79). However, unlike our study, McKenna's research does not seek to understand what motivates students to continue working for the library throughout their time on campus. The other five elements of successful training identified in the literature by McKenna are training assessment, clear student assistant policies, mandatory annual training, online training, and unique roles for individual student workers (McKenna 2020, 75-81). An article by Pham and Muralles (2023) examines the implementation of a peer-led service model that deploys student workers to help with reference, outreach, and library programming with a focus on fostering student-led initiatives to promote student success and belonging (Pham and Muralles 2023, 5). Although their analysis of the program does not focus on retaining students, several relevant suggestions regarding student success and sense of belonging resulted when the authors sought feedback from students working in the program. The suggestions most relevant to retention include implementing clear and flexible workflows and communications that support student interests, creating opportunities for students to lead projects, building relationships with team-based projects that connect students with peers and others in the library, supporting collaboration between student workers and campus student organizations, and developing ways for students to share their knowledge and skills with peers (Pham and Muralles 2023, 116).

## Methodology

We used an anonymous, online Qualtrics survey to collect and analyze student feedback on the specific elements of our program for hiring, training, and retaining student assistants that motivate and encourage them to return each semester (see Appendix). We used a combination of question types to gather qualitative and quantitative feedback. We piloted the survey to test functionality and gathered feedback about the clarity of questions, how we might improve the experience of taking the survey, and the length of time it took to complete the survey. Based on this feedback, we removed some qualitative questions, added display logic to streamline responses, and limited the total number of questions to ensure participants could complete the survey efficiently. We also utilized Qualtrics' Expert Review tool to make further improvements to the overall accessibility and experience.

The survey consists of multiple choice, multiple selection, five-point rating, sliding scales, and free text response options. The survey also used display logic to ask follow-up questions based on certain responses, such as specific aspects of positive or negative interactions with supervisors. The questions were divided into sections representing the various components of

our Access Services Student Assistant Program for hiring, training, and retaining student employees.

Participation was not incentivized beyond acknowledging that the feedback may be used to improve our program or inform other practitioners' programs. To elicit candid feedback, we declined to collect emails or other personal identifiers and emphasized in our combination recruitment and consent message that participating in the survey would have no effect on current or future employment. The survey itself included the recruitment and consent language to assure respondents that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their employment status with the library. We limited our list of possible respondents to student assistants who worked at least two semesters in Access Services between 2018 and 2023 to ensure our data came from students who had experienced all aspects of our hiring, training, and retention program. Based on those criteria, we had 66 possible respondents. We sent a link to the survey with the combination recruitment and consent message via email early in the spring semester (in February). We sent a follow-up email two weeks later and a third and final email calling for participation two weeks after that. Of the 66 eligible students, 17 initiated a survey response, but not all respondents answered all the survey questions.

Our goal with this study was not to predict the behavior of student assistants across a large general population, but to report on our specific program by surveying a census of informed student assistants to corroborate our high retention rate and receive anecdotal observations about why students stay with us. Thus, a high response rate, while preferred, was not critical to our goal. Nevertheless, the response rate is the most noteworthy limitation of our study at just 24.24 percent. We suspect the biggest obstacle to gathering responses was the makeup of our eligible pool of respondents. Fifty-five of the 66 eligible student assistants had graduated by the time we distributed the survey and consent form to their university email address. We have no way to know which students responded to the anonymous survey, but it is likely that many of the graduates no longer regularly check their university email account. The 11 eligible students who were still employed at the time the survey was distributed were encouraged to participate during their scheduled shifts.

A second factor affecting our response rate was that we did not incentivize participation beyond explaining how their participation might help us improve the program for them and for future students. It is possible that a small monetary incentive, such as a \$15 gift card, might have increased our response rate, but we wanted to balance the need for a large number of responses with the need for honest and candid feedback, especially since our goal was only to report on a program.

## Findings

In the following sections, we will discuss the results of the responses and add context to better understand what they mean. We will also acknowledge limitations as they arise and look for areas of recommendation for changes to our program or further investigation.

## Hiring

To attract the best possible pool of candidates to fill available positions, we have implemented several best practices based on our university's hiring guidelines for staff and faculty. We begin the process by posting a detailed job description that emphasizes a commitment to equity and diversity to the university's Student Job Board and encourage our current student assistants to refer friends and classmates to apply. The application requires students to provide a copy of their resume and a copy of their upcoming class schedule. We use this information to determine which students are likely to have the skills and availability to meet the library's needs. Once the candidates are identified, we invite them to a 30-minute interview. The interviews are conducted in person, over the phone, or via Zoom, depending on students' availability and preference. Each interview follows a standard script and set of questions to ensure consistency, mitigate implicit biases, and set expectations for the candidates about the hiring process. Our script also offers support for the candidate to minimize stress and nervousness, such as reminding them it is ok to take a moment before answering and inviting them to ask clarifying questions as needed. The standardized set of questions is designed to find the best possible candidate primarily based on soft skills that best fit the position description, such as reliability, punctuality, attention to detail, and exceptional customer service. At the end of each interview, the candidate has an opportunity to ask the interviewer questions before our ending script sets expectations about next steps in the hiring process. Those expectations include when the candidate may expect a decision to be made, how they can ask questions, and an affirmation that if they are not the successful candidate, we hope they will continue to visit the library and take advantage of the resources and services we offer.

When we posed the question "Why did you accept the job offer?," all 16 respondents selected "flexible schedule" from the provided list of options. This finding is in line with anecdotal feedback and the literature review (Farr and Valentine 2011; Smith and Galbraith 2012). We were surprised, however, to see the second most popular choice was a "positive interview experience," with 13 of 16 respondents. The research tool used display logic to solicit additional feedback from these 13 respondents. All 13 noted "conversation with interviewer" and 11 noted "length of interview." Some respondents noted, "[The interviewer] was super friendly,

professional and supportive throughout the whole process”; “[The interviewer] made me feel very welcome and invited to the library team”; “Very straightforward and simple”; “Very transparent”; and “[The interviewer] did a wonderful job of making sure I was comfortable while also detailing the expectations of the job.” It should be noted that the co-authors of this paper conducted all the interviews during this period; however, the standard set of questions and interviewer script enable any supervisor to step into the role.

### Onboarding and Training

Once the successful candidates accept the job offer and are officially onboarded through the Student Employment Center and Human Resources processes, they begin participating in the Access Services onboarding and training program. The first step in the process is to send each new student a welcome email that introduces them to their direct supervisor and provides information on how to log in and use the scheduling software When to Work (W2W). The student is scheduled for up to 10 hours of training shifts once their schedule preferences are set in W2W. Training follows a set checklist of synchronous and asynchronous activities to set expectations, orient the student to the library’s physical and digital spaces, and prepare them to perform all required tasks. All supervisors in Access Services participate in training the student assistants according to their area of expertise and their availability matched with the students’ schedules. Supervisors meet regularly to ensure consistency across all training modules, regardless of who is leading each section at any given time.

In this section of the survey, we asked respondents a series of questions about their onboarding and training experiences to better understand which individual elements of the training program were most relevant and helpful in preparing them for their role in Access Services. These elements were the Student Assistant Handbook, the self-guided library tour, an online quiz about the library’s website, one-on-one training with Access Services supervisors, several “learn by doing” exercises, and setting expectations. The onboarding and training program was designed not only to help students thrive in their roles but also to minimize the impact on any one supervisor’s time and energy. Each student is trained for approximately six to 10 hours before their first non-training shift. When the library fully reopened after the initial COVID-19 pandemic closures, all returning and newly hired student assistants had to be trained or retrained, totaling more than 200 hours. The synchronous and asynchronous modules allowed us to evenly divide that time between all six Access Services supervisors.

Again, some of the responses in this section were in line with our prior assumptions based on anecdotal information and the literature review (Farr and Valentine 2011; McKenna 2020), but there were a few notable surprises. Of the 14 responses to the question “How helpful was

the Student Assistant Handbook in setting expectations for your role?," 11 said it was somewhat to extremely helpful. Like the standardized interview questions and script, the handbook was deliberately designed to help ensure consistency of our student assistants' experiences, expectations, and support. The handbook includes information on expectations of reliability, dress code, customer service, and more. The handbook was updated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to include information about Student Support Services on campus such as the Counseling Center and the Food Pantry. A specific time is set aside during the training process to discuss the handbook and answer questions about its content. Typically, the supervisor leading the training will point out the most important sections of the handbook as outlined previously. After the discussion, the newly onboarded student signs an acknowledgment that they have read and understood the handbook, which is kept on file with library administration. Although it is one small part of the onboarding and training experience, it was affirming to learn that survey respondents appreciated the effort and consideration that went into its creation and found the information contained therein useful.

The self-guided library tour and library website quiz were similarly designed to save supervisor time and offer students a different mode of learning. We were pleasantly surprised to see that 13 of 14 respondents indicated the self-guided building tour was somewhat to extremely helpful in acclimating them to the library. Twelve of 14 respondents said the library website quiz was somewhat to extremely helpful. All 14 respondents said the one-on-one training with Access Services supervisors was somewhat to extremely helpful in preparing them to work. As mentioned, these one-on-one training sessions are conducted by all Access Services supervisors, who are trained to provide the same information to each student to ensure consistency.

All 14 respondents said that "learning by doing" was extremely helpful in preparing them to work in Access Services. Our "learning by doing" activities include mock phone calls, mock laptop checkouts, mock interlibrary loan request processing, several specific examples of common problems, and others.

Thirteen of 14 respondents said they definitely understood expectations for what to accomplish during their shifts and definitely understood expectations for attendance and reliability after completing the training checklist. Only one respondent said they mostly understood those expectations. One respondent noted, "All supervisors were very helpful and explained different duties in a well-organized and detailed fashion." Again, setting those expectations was deliberate when designing the training checklist modules.

## Work and Culture

Next, we wanted to better understand how the work culture and specific tasks in Access Services affect student assistants' ability to thrive in their roles and encourage them to return to the library year after year. Some answers were in line with our assumptions, but again, we encountered surprising outliers. During normal operations, a supervisor is always present at the same time as the student assistants because supervisors are equipped to solve novel or complex problems and address patron complaints. Respondents' answers varied widely when asked "how important is having a supervisor available at all times?" Two said it was slightly important, six said it was moderately important, three said it was very important, and three said it was extremely important. Anecdotally, we know the longer a student works in Access Services, the less supervision and support they need over time, but it would be interesting to formally investigate what types of support students need to perform their job duties and if those needs change based on length of employment, type of problem, schedule, and other factors.

The responses also varied widely when respondents were asked how much interactions with their direct supervisor motivate them to do good work and to return to the library year after year. Three respondents said "not at all," two said "a little," three said "a moderate amount," two said "a lot," and four said "a great deal." Each of the six supervisors in Access Services is responsible for directly supervising a group of four to eight student assistants. Direct supervisors process onboarding paperwork; approve timecards, sick leave, and vacation requests; conduct regular performance appraisals; and meet with their students one-on-one to address any concerns that arise. It is likely that those interactions vary by supervisor and student assistant for any number of reasons (personality clashes, schedule conflicts, personal preference, communication styles); however, we should review our best practices to see if we can improve consistency as we did for our hiring, onboarding, and training practices.

Ensuring students understand our expectations helps us when addressing performance issues such as tardiness, absenteeism, lack of attention to detail, poor customer service, and other problems. Each supervisor is trained to remind the student of the expectations we set, detail how those expectations were not met, and find a path forward. Supervisors are also encouraged to approach students with empathy and find mutually beneficial solutions to problems (such as adjusting work schedules for chronically tardy students to set them up for success, rather than simply starting with a punishment). Between fall 2018 and fall 2023, only two students have not been invited to return to work the following semester for failing to meet expectations. Reprimands are never easy, but we do our best to work together with the student for a positive outcome. When asked if they "had ever been reprimanded by a direct supervisor,"

nine respondents said “no,” two declined to answer, and three said “yes.” Of the three respondents who said they had been reprimanded, two indicated the experience was “very positive.” One respondent used the free text option to add,

*I was given lots of support and understanding from my supervisors. Even when I was not the best worker, my supervisors were empathetic and supportive. Although I have graduated for over a year now, I still have lots of [gratitude] towards all of the supervisors at [the library].*

Although the response numbers to this question are low, it indicates that our best practices for reprimands have worked in those cases.

Direct supervisors conduct performance appraisals for each of their direct reports at the end of each semester, which includes a standard rubric and a one-on-one meeting with each student to discuss their performance, celebrate successes, look for areas of improvement, and set goals for the following semester. Unfortunately, only 2 of the 14 respondents said the performance appraisal was an important factor in determining whether to return to the library or motivating them to do good work. Most of the respondents said it was not important or they had no opinion. The performance appraisal process is less coordinated and consistent than the hiring, onboarding, training, and day-to-day supervisory programs we’ve discussed and should be assessed and modified to meet the effectiveness of the hiring, onboarding, and training elements.

We used a sliding scale (one to five, lowest to highest) to try to determine which of the individual benefits of working at the library were the most important to our students. Again, “flexible schedule” was the highest rated, with a mean response of 4.86. The next highest-rated benefit was the “culture at [the library]” with a mean response of 4.21. We defined culture in the survey as the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that make up our general work atmosphere, such as our commitment to diversity and inclusion, supportive mental health, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, and so on. As noted previously, creating a positive work culture is deliberate, and we were not surprised by its high rating. However, we were surprised to see “study abroad job security” as the third highest-rated benefit, with a mean rating of 4.08, because such a small number of students study abroad each semester. It is possible that the few students who studied abroad while employed at the library are the same students who participated in this survey and thus skewed the results. The lowest-rated benefits were our Career Services Workshop, with a mean 2.38 rating; “creative projects,” with a 2.36 mean rating; the annual orientation, with a 2.25 mean; and “working special events,” with a 2.07 mean

rating. We acknowledge that the lowest-rated benefits have also been the most inconsistent during the period these students worked for us, and it was not surprising to see them at the bottom of the list. More investigation is needed to determine which of these would be beneficial in retaining and motivating students if they were more consistent.

Several respondents used the free-text option to offer information about other benefits of working at the library that were not provided on the sliding scale. They shared that “you get to meet a lot more people at the school than other students,” “exposure to events or how to navigate the library’s website in a greater way than the average student,” and “learning about resources on campus and within the library” are important benefits. Others reiterated positive supervisor feedback, saying, “all the supervisors are fantastic,” “amazing bosses,” and “I love that everyone is very accommodating to our student schedules.” Aside from the low rating on the performance appraisal process, the consistency of our supervisory training is effective at maintaining a positive work environment for our student assistants and maintaining that the positive experience is not contingent on being assigned to any one supervisor.

### Recognition and Workforce Preparation

In this section, we discuss how our recognition efforts contribute to our high retention rates and how the full scope of working in Access Services prepares student assistants to enter the workforce post-graduation.

On a sliding scale from one (lowest) to five (highest), respondents indicated that the Student Appreciation Luncheons held at the end of each semester are the most impactful recognition activity, with a 4.38 mean rating. In addition to food and casual conversation, the luncheons typically include formal recognition of the semester’s graduating student assistants. Graduates are also invited to choose any book in the library’s print collection to be plated in recognition of their service to the library. The graduates are given a small gift during the luncheon and are invited to share what book they selected and why. These bookplates were rated second highest of our recognition efforts, with a mean 3.92 rating. The other two recognition efforts listed on the survey, the Holloman Scholarship and Student Assistant of the Year nomination had 3.62 and 3.33 mean ratings, respectively. However, given the low number of respondents to this survey, we acknowledge that these ratings might be skewed toward scholarship and nomination recipients, who may have been more likely to participate, given their level of engagement while employed at the library.

When asked, “Do you feel this job has prepared you for the workforce post-graduation?,” all 13 respondents said “yes.” All supervisors emphasize the transferable soft skills that student assistants can expect to gain from working in Access Services from hiring through graduation.

We reinforce the importance of communication, reliability, initiative, and collaboration daily. We also emphasize what constitutes good customer service, why attention to detail matters, and how to acknowledge mistakes, learn from them, and move forward. When asked to elaborate on how specifically the respondents were prepared to enter the workforce, 13 said they “gained customer service skills,” 13 said they “gained or improved their ability to communicate with coworkers and supervisors,” 11 said they “learned to work independently,” 10 said they “improved their reliability,” and 10 said they “learned to work as part a team.” One respondent used the free-text option to share, “It was an incredible experience, and I wish I didn't take it for granted when I worked there! Thank you for all the hard work you do, and I hope you receive the recognition and support you deserve.” Another shared, “I loved my time working at [library] and always recommend it as a work-study job whenever I am talking to any college student.”

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the limitations of our survey, the results, combined with our high retention rates, anecdotal evidence, and findings in the literature review, show that our best practices for hiring, onboarding, training, recognition, and workforce preparation motivate our student assistants to do good work and return year after year. Our evaluation of the specific elements of our student assistant program reveals several key insights and areas for further investigation. The consistently positive feedback regarding flexible schedules and a supportive interview experience highlights the effectiveness of our hiring practices. The strong appreciation for the structured onboarding and training process indicates that our efforts to provide consistent and thorough preparation are successful. However, more work is needed to assess our need for direct day-to-day supervision for all students and to improve our performance appraisal process and specific work-preparation activities such as the Annual Orientation and Career Services Workshop.

We recommend that researchers using a survey to conduct similar studies review our methodology for details on how to do so effectively. We also suggest they consider the following to improve their response rate: focus on currently employed students, incentivize participation with something tangible, and create a separate exit survey for graduating seniors. Future researchers could also expand their literature review to include student assistant programs in other university departments to look for other motivation and retention practices that could be adapted to suit an academic library's needs.

Based on the results of this study, we recommend the following for any academic library Access Services department looking to improve their student assistant retention, productivity, and job satisfaction rates:

- Mirror hiring, onboarding, and training best practices for faculty and staff for student assistants.
- Put processes in place to ensure interviews are equitable and consistent for all candidates.
- Utilize synchronous and asynchronous training modules to ensure consistency for all new hires and to save required supervisor training time.
- Create a Student Assistant Handbook and review it carefully with all new hires to set expectations and refer to it when students do not meet those expectations.
- Approach students with support and empathy when correcting mistakes.
- Ensure supervisors are equipped with adequate training and support to ensure student assistants experience consistent communication, support, and supervision.
- Create meaningful recognition practices, like graduating senior bookplates and end-of-semester luncheons.
- Prepare students to enter the workforce after graduation by emphasizing that the soft skills they develop in the library can be transferred to any workplace, regardless of discipline or industry (communication, customer service, working as part of a team, taking initiative, and more).

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## Appendix: Student Assistant Feedback Survey Questions

### Section 1: Hiring Process

Have you worked in Copley Library Access Services as a Federal Work Study or ROTC Fellow Student Assistant for two semesters or more?

Yes No

How did you find the job listing for a Student Assistant in Copley Library Access Services?

OneStop Job Board

Social Media

Word of Mouth/Friend Referral

Other

Why did you accept the job offer for a Student Assistant in Copley Access Services? Check all that apply.

Positive interview experience

Description of job duties (emphasis on customer service, circulation tasks)

Flexible schedule

Friend/acquaintance referral

Other

What aspects of the interview process for the Copley Library Student Assistant were positive? Check all that apply.

Length of interview (15–30 min.)

Conversation with interviewer

Phone interview

Zoom interview

In-person interview

Other

Is there anything else you would like to share about the hiring process?

### Section 2: Training Process

You were provided with a copy of the Student Assistant Handbook and discussed it with a supervisor during your first training shift. The Handbook outlines our policies, expectations for work and reliability, and includes information on support systems offered to USD students. How helpful was the Student Assistant Handbook in setting expectations for your role at Copley Library?

- Not at all helpful
- Somewhat unhelpful
- Neither unhelpful nor helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Extremely helpful

On or around your first training shift you were given a checklist and asked to explore the Library building alone. How helpful was the Self-Guided Tour at acclimating you to the Copley Library Building?

- Not at all helpful
- Somewhat unhelpful
- Neither unhelpful nor helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Extremely helpful

You were given an online quiz that was designed to orient you to the Library's website (not the "wizard quiz"). How helpful was the online quiz at acclimating you to the Library website?

- Not at all helpful
- Somewhat unhelpful
- Neither unhelpful nor helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Extremely helpful

How helpful was the one-on-one training with Copley Access Services staff (Sierra processes, Reserves/ILL, customer service, phone etiquette, etc.)?

- Not at all helpful
- Somewhat unhelpful
- Neither unhelpful nor helpful
- Somewhat helpful

Extremely helpful

During your training you were asked to “learn by doing” by checking items out to patrons (books, laptops, technology accessories, markers, other); answering the phone; and answering patron questions with a supervisor nearby for support. How helpful was “learning by doing” in preparing you to work in Copley Library Access Services?

Not at all helpful

Somewhat unhelpful

Neither unhelpful nor helpful

Somewhat helpful

Extremely helpful

Did you understand our expectations for what to accomplish during your shifts when you completed your training? (Providing good customer service, circulating materials correctly, when to ask for help, etc.)

Did not understand expectations

Slightly understood expectations

Somewhat understood expectations

Mostly understood expectations

Definitely understood expectations

Did you understand our expectations for attendance and reliability when you completed your training shifts?

Did not understand expectations

Slightly understood expectations

Somewhat understood expectations

Mostly understood expectations

Definitely understood expectations

Thinking about how training prepared you for work, please rate how ready you felt to work alone once your training shifts were complete. 1 means “not prepared,” and 5 means “fully prepared.” You must choose a number greater than zero to answer.

0    1    2    3    4    5

Slide to answer. You must choose a number greater than zero.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your training and onboarding experiences?

### Section 3: Quality Management

There is always a supervisor available onsite in Access Services to answer questions, solve problems, intervene with a challenging patron, and otherwise support Student Assistants. How important is having a supervisor available at all times in determining your return to Copley Library or motivating you to work?

Not at all important

Slightly important

Moderately important

Very important

Extremely important

Your direct supervisor is responsible for approving your time card, following up on questions, conducting your performance reviews, and being available to answer your questions. How much did these interactions influence your decision to return to Copley Library or motivate you to do good work?

Not at all

A little

A moderate amount

A lot

A great deal

Have you ever been reprimanded by your direct supervisor for absenteeism, tardiness, attitude, or other problems?

Yes

No

Decline to answer

Please rate your experience working on a problem with your direct supervisor.

Not at all positive

- Slightly positive
- Somewhat positive
- Very positive
- No opinion
- Other

Please rate your experiences interacting with other supervisors in Copley Library Access Services besides your direct supervisor. My interactions with other supervisors have been:

- Extremely negative
- Mostly negative
- Neutral/No opinion
- Mostly positive
- Extremely positive

Please share what about your experiences were negative or neutral (select all that apply):

- Lack of consistency (policies, helpfulness)
- Communication
- Other

Please share what about your experiences were positive (select all that apply):

- Consistency (policies, helpfulness)
- Communication
- Other

Your direct supervisor conducts Performance Evaluations at the end of each semester. You are evaluated on your quality of work, reliability, attitude, attendance, and overall performance. The Performance Evaluations also give you an opportunity to discuss the job with your supervisor and address any concerns. How important are the evaluations in determining your return to Copley Library or motivating you to work?

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

No opinion

ROTC Fellow – Not Applicable

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience interacting with your direct supervisor and/or other supervisors in Access Services?

#### Section 4: Supporting the Whole Student

Thinking about the benefits of working at Copley Library, please rate the following on how important they are in motivating you to do good work and/or return to Copley each year. 1 means “not important” and 5 means “extremely important.” You must choose a number greater than zero to answer.

0      1      2      3      4      5

- Flexible Schedule
- Type of Work (customer service, circulating materials)
- Working during Intersession or Summer
- Working special events (Alcala Bazaar, Banned Books Week, others)
- Creative Projects & Ideas (social media, videos, policy changes, improving workflows)
- Culture at Copley Library (attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that make up our general work atmosphere such as our commitment to diversity & inclusion; support of mental health; relationships with colleagues and supervisors, etc.)
- Study Abroad job security (Copley will save your job for your return)
- Career Services
- Workshop Annual Orientation

Are there any other benefits of working at Copley Library that we haven't listed here?

Yes, please describe.

No

Is there anything else about the benefits at Copley Library that you would like to share?

## Section 5: Recognition

Thinking about our recognition efforts, please rate the following on how important they are in motivating you to do good work and/or return to Copley each year from least important (1) to most important (5). You must choose a number greater than zero to answer.

0      1      2      3      4      5

- Student Appreciation Luncheons (December & May)
- Graduating Senior Bookplates
- Student Assistant of the Year Nomination
- Roy and Marian Holleman Scholarship

Do you feel this job has prepared you for the workforce post-graduation?

Yes No

Please select all the ways this job has prepared you for the workforce:

I have learned to work independently

I have learned to work as part of a team

I have gained or improved my ability to communicate with coworkers and supervisors

I have gained customer service skills

I have improved my reliability

Other

Please explain why you feel this job has NOT prepared you to enter the workforce post-graduation.

## Block 5

Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience working at Copley Library?

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