Student Workers and Special Collections: A Symbiotic Relationship?

Allison McKittrick & Laura Romans
Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives
University of Tennessee Libraries
What is a current issue or trend that you think deserves more attention when it comes to student employment in the archives?
Purpose

- Generate discussion about experience with student workers
  - Current practices
  - How practices vary between archival organizations
  - Challenges and benefits
- Participate in community of support and reflection
- Look toward establishing best practices

Session Agenda

- Reflect on our experiences of student employment
- Share inventories of student workers in our organizations
- Examine the challenges and benefits of student labor in the archives
Pick the option that best describes your experience:

A. a supervisor of student workers  
B. a student worker  
C. both A and B
What is the education level of your student workers?

A  High school
B  Undergraduate
C  Graduate
Types of Student Positions

- Student Library Assistants
  - Undergraduate/Graduate
  - Base Pay

- Graduate Student Library Assistants
  - Graduate
  - Higher than Base Pay

- Graduate Research Assistants
  - Tuition assistance; stipend
  - One-year contract

- Practicum Students
  - Single semester
  - Case-by-case
Students @ UT Libraries Special Collections

How We Hire

- Post Position Announcement
- Interview in Person
At a glance: Who are our students?

- Mostly humanities majors, but . . .
- Mostly undergraduates
- SIS students for practicums and GAs
- Qualities: interested, engaged, curious, reliable, and bright
How many students do you supervise?

one

two

three

four or more
What is the ratio of supervisors to students in your organization?

- 1:1
- 1:2
- 1:3
- 1:4 or more
What is the ratio of supervisors to students in your organization?

A. 1:1

B. 1:2

C. 1:3

D. 1:4 or more
Students @
UT Libraries Special Collections

SLA/GSLA
Manuscripts - 2 : 4
University Archives - 2 : 4
Modern Political Archives - 1 : 2
Rare Books - 1 : 1
Reference/Reading Room - 1 : 2
Preservation Lab - 1 : 2

GRA
Departmental - 1 : 1

Supervisors : Students
8 : 16
Special Collection by the numbers

July 2017 - June 2018

Number of classes: 84
Number of students: 1039
Volume of researchers: 371
Collections made available: 246
What tasks do the student workers at your organization do?
Student Tasks: Archival Collections

Archival Collections

- Process new collections
  - Arrangement
  - Light preservation (removing metal, cleaning, Mylar, photocopying)
  - Description
- Inventory new acquisitions
- Rehouse collections
- Assist with exhibit preparations
- Help with general department maintenance/cleanliness
Student Tasks: Reading Room Reference Desk

- Greet researchers
- Page and monitor use of materials
- Ensure policies are followed
- Answer basic questions
- Connect users to appropriate faculty for reference
Student Tasks: Reading Room Ref Desk (continued)

- Shelve books
- Shelf-read
- Process new books and materials
- “Other duties as assigned”
Challenges & Benefits
ACTIVITY:
What are the challenges and benefits of having student workers in the archives?

With your group, brainstorm and list:

Group 1: Challenges for supervisors
Group 2: Challenges for student workers
Group 3: Benefits for supervisors
Group 4: Benefits for student workers
Group 1: Challenges for supervisors?

- Recruiting and retaining students
- Training students
- Balancing needs:
  What we can expect from students and what do we owe students?
Group 2: Challenges for student workers?

- Tedious work in processing collections
- Menial tasks
- Physically demanding tasks
- Low wages
- School/work/life balance
Group 3: Benefits for supervisors?

- More time to focus on larger picture
- Availability of student input and expertise
- Development of meaningful, rewarding relationships with students
- Demonstration of value to the organization and parent organizations
Group 4: Benefits for student workers?

- Valuable work experience for future jobs
- Mentoring
- Development of research skills and primary source literacy
- Fascinating content to work with
- Change of pace from academics
“Because people are the most valuable resource an archives has to care for its collections, a staff that is engaged, challenged to grow professionally, hardworking, creative, and supported can make any archives a wonderful place to work.”

Murphy, Nora, “When the Resources Are Human: Managing Staff, Students, and Ourselves,” in *Journal of Archival Organization* vol. 7 no. 1-2: 66-73.