Assessment
in
Practice

Connecting Student Employment to Student Learning & Development

Olivia Baca, Cindy Pierard, & Anne Schultz
University of New Mexico

June 2020

Student employment has not always been associated with student success, yet most students work during college and many work in libraries. The University of New Mexico University Libraries (UNMUL) Access Services team leveraged our student employment program to enhance students' connection with their overall educational experience. We redesigned our employment practices. We also implemented the Iowa GROW® (Guided Reflection on Work) program to learn more about the connections students saw between their jobs, their learning, and their career goals. A study of our implementation of the GROW® program found it to benefit both student employees and student supervisors.

WHY FOCUS ON STUDENT EMPLOYMENT?

Research has found the effect of student employment on student success in college to be mixed. Some studies have found employment to distract from and diminish student persistence and engagement; others have found employment to benefit learning in domains including independence, intercultural understanding, and leadership (Astin, 1993; Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett, & Blaich, 2012).

Although the evidence of effects may be mixed, it is clear that many students work during college. Nearly half of all full-time undergraduates and more than 80% of part-time undergraduates are employed while enrolled (Condition of Education, 2019). This is true of students at the University of New Mexico, a Carnegie Research 1 Doctoral institution that is also a Minority-Serving Institution and a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a high percentage (37.5%) of students who are Pell-eligible. It was clear to our library staff that most of our student employees relied on work-study jobs to finance their education. This spurred us to consider how we could structure their employment experience to be beneficial to their learning and success.

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT WITH UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

No two libraries are exactly alike, but in many libraries the Access Services group acts as the public face of the library. Access Services at UNMUL helps library users access resources and services both in person and online. Services provided by our staff and student workforce include: circulating and maintaining library collections; assisting users with information and research questions; technology troubleshooting, and managing the library's public spaces.

UNMUL Access Services leadership has taken steps over several years to professionalize student employment, and improve the work experience of students. This direction is in line with the nation-wide emphasis on re-examining student employment.

> "With so many undergraduates today working while pursuing their studies, it is incumbent on college and university leaders, faculty, academic advisors, student affairs professionals, and others committed to helping students to become more informed about how to harness the benefits of employment and both student engagement and educational outcomes" (Kuh, 2018, p. xiii).

We have rewritten position descriptions and job postings to articulate the complexity and high-performance expectations the roles entail. Applying for our student positions now requires a resume, cover letter, and interview. A tiered staffing structure has been adopted to provide a path to promotion for peer supervision. Performance evaluations help library staff encourage good work, correct issues early, and give student employees experience receiving constructive feedback from peers and supervisors. Student workers also meet regularly with peers and staff to plan and organize work projects. These steps in concert cultivate a sense of ownership and engagement for our student workers.

FROM IOWA TO NEW MEXICO: IMPLEMENTING AND STUDYING LOBO GROW®

The University of Iowa established Iowa GROW® in 2009, as a mechanism for achieving their goal "to make student employment a high-impact activity that allows students to reflect and integrate learning" (University of Iowa, 2020). Drawing inspiration from George Kuh (2008) and others who have championed High-Impact Practices, the program provides opportunities for student employees and their supervisors to explore connections between student work, student learning, and student career goals through structured conversations.

The Iowa GROW® conversation protocol includes four standard questions that supervisors ask their student employees in each interaction:

1. How is this job fitting in with your academics?
2. What are you learning here at work that is helping you in school?
3. What are you learning in class that you can apply here at work?

"...everybody is so different and you learn about their cultures and... [i]t's so nice to work with people that are so different."

-Student Participant

4. Can you give me a couple examples of things you are learning here at work that you will use in your chosen profession?

Our team received permission to use the Iowa GROW® protocol and conducted a local implementation, deemed Lobo GROW®, for a two-year period. All UNMUL Access Services student employees participated in the program, which included taking an annual online survey and holding two conversations per semester with their supervisor. We knew that our Iowa colleagues had continually reviewed the annual GROW® surveys to identify benefits of the program. We were interested in identifying connection points and potential benefits revealed during the GROW® conversations. For those students who provided consent, we recorded and analyzed the conversation transcripts to explore three research questions:

1. Do students make connections between their learning at work and in class?
2. Do students make connections between their learning at work and their career goals?
3. What are the connection points identified by students?

The resulting dataset was significant: four semesters of recorded conversations with nearly 100 student employees across our four libraries. We identified a purposive sample of this data, composed of students who had participated in conversations with a supervisor in all four semesters of the study. We analyzed a subset of this population (n=14), examining conversation data for student employees drawn from each of our four campus libraries. Our qualitative analysis included the development of a common code book, which we used to identify themes in student responses over time and across conversations.

We also sought to understand the impact of the GROW® program on supervisors. At the conclusion of the two-year study, we debriefed the staff supervisors who implemented the conversations with student workers. Supervisors shared details on the challenges and benefits of implementing the GROW® program in their libraries. They reflected upon the ways in which the conversations enriched their relationships with student employees and solidified a sense of purpose in supporting student development and growth.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Throughout the conversation data, students consistently identified skills and knowledge that were enhanced by the transfer between classroom environments and the workplace.

- 85% identified skills transferred from classroom experiences to work
- 96% identified skills that transferred from their jobs to the classroom and their future careers

Common themes centered upon interpersonal skills, such as communication, empathy with diverse people, and increased confidence in speaking directly to authority figures (supervisors and teaching faculty). Students reflected upon experience gained with organizing and managing time and tasks, directing the

"...this job has really helped me become more comfortable with talking to people. So, it's much easier for me to go to professors now because of this job."

-Student Participant

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work of others, and a personal sense of accountability for both school and their jobs.

Many students gave examples of scenarios in which an experience, either at work or in the classroom, led to a positive outcome in the other setting. One student related how his experience organizing and delegating tasks at his library job improved his ability to handle a semester in which most of his STEM classes required group project work. He attributed his ability to set short term goals, organize a team, and achieve outcomes in the classroom to what he learned on the job. Two other students, both psychology majors, described the ways in which coursework affected their strategies for communicating with library patrons and peer employees. One described her insight into understanding, accepting, and empathizing with someone with a very different perspective, which allowed her to calmly resolve a difficult situation.

Students articulated important skills that they believe will assist them after graduation, as they move on to either graduate school or professional jobs. Again, the ability to communicate effectively and with empathy was mentioned by several students. Others spoke about learning to lead a team and the importance of being a good team member. They expressed confidence in using their knowledge and abilities in other job environments.

Our supervisors universally agreed that the Lobo GROW® program had a positive effect on students' ability to think critically and thoughtfully about skills and knowledge gained through their classes and campus jobs. GROW®'s focus on intentional conversations also affected the supervisors: listening to the students' experiences has led to deliberate efforts to enhance learning opportunities at work. Supervisors structure projects to foster leadership, creativity, and technological skill development. They offer more opportunity for growth, feedback on job performance, and development of skills that will assist students in making the transition to post-college life. The Lobo GROW® program has increased the value of the student employment experience for employees and supervisors alike.

NEXT STEPS AND FUTURE PLANS

With our formal study period complete, where do we go next? The top priority is to analyze conversation data for the remaining students in the purposive sample. We are curious to see if patterns hold and if new insights are revealed. Once all data analysis is complete, we plan to share our findings in a formal paper. We have also identified additional questions to explore. One example is to follow up with students who participated in Lobo GROW® and have now graduated. Some of the GROW® protocol has students forecasting how their experience as student employees might affect their post-college career goals. Now that these graduates have begun pursuing their goals, did their predicted connections— those things they thought would be useful—hold true? Are there aspects of their student work experience that they see differently now? How could these insights benefit incoming or current student employees?

"...just interacting with other coworkers, especially now that I do have a more of a supervisor role and that we have more new students. It's given me a lot of insight of how to direct people..."

-Student Participant

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Beyond the study, we want to uphold and build upon the practices we have started. All of our student supervisors saw benefits to holding regular structured conversations with their student employees. For our setting, we believe an interval of one conversation per semester is optimal for reviewing connections between work, learning, and career plans. Complementary to the conversations, we intend to set goals for student employees—identifying work experiences that may reinforce a particular connection or interest. We could ask business students to develop strategies for marketing new library services. Psychology students might share insights from their coursework on de-escalating conflict during difficult work interactions. For larger student employee groups we may look for common interests and develop group goals.

We are writing this in the midst of a devastating global pandemic, a crisis that has disrupted nearly all aspects of higher education as we have known and practiced it. For our workplace, this means significant changes to everything from the way we onboard, train, and schedule employees, to how we deliver services, to how we manage library spaces. What is unchanged is our belief that education can transform lives and that student supervisors can play a powerful role in supporting and enhancing student learning and success. We may need to find different tools, but we are committed to continuing the conversation and the intersections between student work, learning, development and success.

"I've thought a lot more about training and the way we structure things. We had been trying to provide more opportunities for our students in terms of promotion and growth, taking on more responsibilities, but I think I'm doing that more deliberately and consciously now..."

-Student Supervisor Participant

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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