

Library Employment Practices that Support Student Engagement

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abstract: Academic libraries have long employed students in roles vital to running a library, such as checking books in and out, shelving, and answering basic patron questions. More recently, academic libraries have also sought ways to demonstrate value and align with campus priorities, such as student engagement. This study uses interviews with library employers and the engagement indicators from the National Survey of Student Engagement as a framework for identifying a range of student employment responsibilities and program components that support campus engagement goals and enrich the work experience for students.

Introduction

Academic libraries routinely employ students to help with common, simple functions, such as checking materials in and out, shelving them, and answering routine questions from library users. While critical to library operations, these tasks may not engage those who do them nor contribute significantly to student growth and learning. At some libraries, however, the student role has evolved substantially and now may include such responsibilities as research assistance, student outreach, and even developing and leading library events or projects. Regardless of whether this shift has resulted from short staffing or a new approach to reaching students and supporting their needs, many of these enhanced roles and responsibilities have the added benefit of aligning with the higher education priority of student engagement. Alignment with institutional goals is especially important for academic libraries when colleges and universities face increasing pressure from government bodies, economic factors, and parents to produce the “commodity” of student learning.¹ While many articles and book chapters deal with enhanced student employment programs and their benefits for learners,² little research has explored how student

roles and responsibilities in these upgraded positions map to established engagement metrics that many higher education institutions value, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) engagement indicators.

NSSE, used by over 1,650 institutions since 2000, attempts to identify levels of student engagement on campus, considering them “activities and experiences that have been empirically linked to desired college outcomes.”³ NSSE posits that these activities and experiences can be categorized into noteworthy engagement indicators, such as higher order learning, a supportive environment, and discussion with diverse others. In this study, the authors use modified NSSE engagement indicators to categorize student employees’ responsibilities and components of employment programs at a variety of academic libraries. The research generated a long list of potential roles, responsibilities, and practices that support engagement among student workers. This study attempts to use this established framework to provide libraries with concrete examples of the ways they can contribute to student engagement as defined by their institutions through their student employment practices.

Literature Review

Higher education literature often uses *student engagement* as an umbrella term that incorporates a variety of curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular learning and teaching theories and pedagogical practices that encourage academic success. According to NSSE,

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.⁴

Student engagement has been tied to retention and graduation in addition to learning.⁵

Components of engagement have appeared in literature about student success for many years, but the development of NSSE, coupled with increased accountability pressures on higher education, have put the term and practice at the forefront of campus priorities.⁶

Increased pressure for demonstrating value in higher education has resulted in a variety of approaches to achieve that goal, ranging from economic to social.⁷ The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Value of Academic Libraries Initiative encourages libraries to show their worth to their institutions by tracking various results, including impact on enrollment, retention, graduation rates, job success, achievement, learning, and engagement.⁸ Some of these approaches have provoked pushback criticizing the focus on demonstrating value to outside groups⁹ and arguing for more reflection about the purpose behind these initiatives,¹⁰ among other criticisms. The emphasis on library value and impact has continued, however, and has produced a number of studies that highlight library contributions to student engagement. In 2012, *Student Engagement and the Academic Library* brought several case studies together into an edited book that gave examples of outreach programs, information literacy initiatives, and other student engagement opportunities.¹¹ In 2017, the authors of this paper edited *Students Lead the Library*, a volume of case studies illustrating the impacts of student contributions on collection development, space renovations, support services, marketing, and many other internal functions, as well as student employee and volunteer engagement.¹² Also in 2017, ACRL summarized assessment data from over 200 institutions in the project Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success. This report found compelling evidence that libraries contribute to learning and success in a variety of ways, including promoting academic rapport and student engagement by creating a “sense of belonging.”¹³ These examples, along with numerous other

published studies, document programs or initiatives using student engagement terminology. Such investigations, however, often refer to engagement with the library in terms of increased use or awareness of library resources and services,¹⁴ or participation and learning (that is, engagement) in instruction sessions.¹⁵ They seldom mention student employment in the library and typically do not link outcomes or practices to a student engagement framework or instrument. These programs may contribute to student engagement as defined by NSSE or other instruments, but they do not directly map to commonly used measures or definitions in higher education.

Several articles have used NSSE and other student engagement instruments to analyze information literacy behaviors and library use, and until recently, NSSE included an optional information literacy module that institutions could use when surveying students.¹⁶ However, no articles discuss student library employment as a contributor to engagement in the NSSE frame.¹⁷ More recently, high-impact practices have emerged as a model for examining student employment. This student engagement and retention framework grew out of NSSE's engagement indicators and George Kuh's research.¹⁸ Not specific to libraries, the 2018 book *A Good Job* frames student employment in higher education as a high-impact practice.¹⁹ In library-specific literature, Jill Markgraf maps campus employment practices to high impact practices, listing such benefits as opportunities for students to receive mentoring and to gain critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities.²⁰ Rosan Mitola, Erin Rinto, and Emily Pattni include Markgraf's article and 215 others in a systematic review of publications about academic library student employment to determine the extent to which library activities could be considered high-impact practices.²¹ Notably, two categories aligned with high-impact practices are abundant in the descriptions: time and effort, and faculty and peer interaction. Erin Rinto, Rosan Mitola, and Kate Otto expand on this exploration in a 2019 pair of case studies meant to illustrate additional

ways that academic libraries can incorporate high-impact practices in student employment.²² The majority of student engagement research related to the library has dealt with users of the library, but a growing number of case studies focus on enhanced campus employment programs and the benefits of such efforts. While few use engagement terminology, many of the practices discussed can be mapped to NSSE’s engagement indicators. For example, Lori Mestre and Jessica LeCrone describe the leadership opportunities and increased responsibilities that give student workers an integrated learning opportunity and a chance to build critical thinking skills.²³ Lifeng Han, Yuan Wang, and Lili Luo write about their employment program that focuses on “deep participation” where “students become library partners or collaborators on particular projects, and work with librarians in developing and implementing library services and programs.”²⁴ Liz Vine’s call to treat student worker training as a teaching and learning opportunity, and to frame it as part of a library’s educational practices, is another example of how librarians see an opportunity for mutual growth and enrichment through student employment.²⁵ The library profession has begun to understand and explore the ways the library can improve student engagement, including through employment. By using the NSSE engagement indicators as a frame, this study will further this work by offering specific examples of employment practices that support student engagement in higher education.

Methods

Developing the Themes

The authors selected the NSSE engagement indicators as a tool to help determine which elements of student employment support engagement. NSSE looks at a student’s experience in higher education in general, so the survey instrument does not directly lend itself to campus employment programs. However, the NSSE engagement indicators, upon which the survey is

based, can be used as a framework, with some adaptation, for determining what student job responsibilities and employment program components support engagement. The authors of this article revised the NSSE descriptions of engagement indicators to reflect how student employees interact with their jobs and library employers.²⁶ For example, NSSE lists “higher order learning” as an engagement indicator. The authors adapted the NSSE description of higher order learning, which applies to all experiences in a higher education environment, and made it specific to the library student employee setting. Table 1 shows the revision.

Table 1. An example of a NSSE engagement indicator reinterpreted for library work

	Description of NSSE engagement indicator	NSSE engagement indicator reinterpreted for library work
Higher order learning	Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by calling on students to engage in complex cognitive tasks requiring more than mere memorization of facts. This engagement indicator captures how much students’ coursework emphasizes challenging cognitive tasks, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis.	Student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to engage in higher order thinking. This includes any activity involving complex cognitive tasks requiring more than mere memorization of facts, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis.

*Source: National Survey of Student Engagement, “Engagement Indicators,” 2020, <https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/survey-instruments/engagement-indicators.html>.

The authors systematically revised each description of the NSSE engagement indicators:

- Higher order learning
- Reflective and integrative learning
- Learning strategies
- Quantitative reasoning

- Collaborative learning
- Discussion with diverse others
- Student-faculty interaction
- Effective teaching practices
- Quality of interactions
- Supportive environment.

See Appendix A for the full list of engagement indicators and how the authors revised them.

Interviews

After developing the themes that they would use to identify campus employment practices that support student engagement, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews to gather examples of the work that student employees do in libraries, as well as details about campus employment programs. To hear from a variety of academic libraries and so cover more practices, the authors recruited participants via various e-mail lists offered by the Library Leadership & Management Association (LLAMA) and ACRL, including:

- LLAMA Student Employees and Volunteers in Libraries, studvollib@lists.ala.org
- LLAMA Middle Managers Discussion List, lama-mmdg@lists.ala.org
- ACRL University Libraries Section List, uls-l@lists.ala.org
- ACRL Access Services Interest Group List, acr-igas@lists.ala.org
- ACRL Instruction Section List, ili-l@lists.ala.org.

The authors heard from 16 different institutions and interviewed staff from 11 of those. Eight of the 11 are public, and three are private. They range in size from 2,000 students to over 60,000 students. Most of the interviewees plan or organize campus employment programs as part

of their responsibilities, and many work side-by-side with student employees. Participants supervise students in a variety of roles, including circulation, research help, technology assistance, and outreach, with most functions falling into the area of access services. In smaller institutions, the interviewees often manage all the student workers in their library. At larger institutions, supervisors typically oversee a subset of the student employees in their library system, by location or functional area. In this case, the authors asked participants to talk about the positions they supervised as well as anything they knew about student positions in other departments or libraries on their campus.

The Zoom-based interviews consisted of 11 questions related to student employment at the interviewee's institution. The authors began with an open-ended question that asked participants to summarize their student employee responsibilities, roles, and positions, as well as an overview of the timeline from the hiring of student workers to separation. The authors requested information about training, professional development opportunities, assessment, additional benefits, and the like. This questioning sought descriptions of all aspects of the program, not just features that participants might perceive as related to student engagement. After this open-ended inquiry, the authors asked questions based on the 10 revised NSSE engagement indicators. For example:

Higher order learning

Are there student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to engage in higher order thinking? This includes any activity involving complex cognitive tasks requiring more than mere memorization of facts, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis. If yes, please explain in detail.

If more explanation is required, prompt interviewee with the following.

Are student employees at your library:

- applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations?
- analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts?

- evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source?
- forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information?

See Appendix B for the full list of questions. The purpose of these inquiries was not to quantify or determine if these practices existed in student employment programs, but rather to gather examples of how these practices were carried out.

Analysis

After gathering this information, the authors conducted deductive thematic analysis, looking within the data for the pre-identified themes derived from the NSSE indicators. The investigators tested for inter-rater reliability using the same transcript from one interview, then coded all the interview responses to determine which student employment responsibilities and program components corresponded to an engagement indicator. This coding was necessary because of the introductory open-ended question, which could take up half the interview and touch on many topics related to employment. Additionally, despite that other questions were already mapped to specific engagement indicators, the fluid nature of the interview conversations and the interconnectedness of student employment programs meant participants would often mention examples and details in response to one question that also provided relevant information about other indicators. The limitations to this study included:

- The authors found it impossible to capture every student employee role or responsibility in academic libraries.
- The categorization of responsibilities, roles, or aspects of a program as contributing to student engagement were based on the descriptions of NSSE engagement indicators, not actual student employee feedback.

Results

The interviews generated numerous examples of student employee responsibilities and program components that contribute to engagement. The following sections represent a selection of these examples, as well as quotations from the interviews for additional context. The quotations have been edited for clarity but otherwise are presented as recorded. See the full list of student employment practices mapped to engagement indicators in Table 2.

The authors found numerous examples of student responsibilities that demanded higher order learning. Among these activities were well-known roles that required learners to use independent judgment, such as peer research assistance, creating or leading training for other student workers, opening and closing a building, and providing technology support. The responsibilities also included less common tasks, such as developing assessment tools, library policy creation, and project management. One interviewee reported that student employees carry out group interviews of potential new student workers, including creating tools for candidate evaluation.

Reflective and Integrative Learning

The reflective and integrative learning engagement indicator suggests that student employees should have the opportunity to relate their understandings and experiences to job tasks, to make connections between their work and the world around them, or both. The authors identified tasks that include explicit reflection activities for immediate training and job knowledge, as well as thinking about longer term career and job goals. For example, one library holds a workshop for student employees described this way:

Look at their job description and try to figure out how to articulate the words they use when they're here in the library. And try to turn that into a transferable skill, because if they're not going to go work for a library, processing call slips means nothing to most employers, so how do they take

what they do every day and turn it into language that can be more generalized or language that will lend itself specifically to the career field that they're trying to move into.

This indicator was also represented in activities that require students to use real-world tools (such as business software) or strategies (such as collaborating with coworkers), and in situations where they witness the impact and implications of external issues on the organization. One interviewee suggested an example of such a situation was when “they see the limits that funding can create for the institution. So sometimes all will bemoan effects together.”

Learning Strategies

The learning strategies engagement indicator encourages learning and retention by actively engaging with new information. This strategy was often a component of student employment programs created by the employer for training purposes. These programs include such activities as students teaching each other, making materials available to review after training, and prompting students to summarize what they have learned. One interviewee described a “role play where I will act as a patron and stick pretty hard to that role and try to make the students really try to problem-solve and find the answer.”

Quantitative Reasoning

The authors found the quantitative reasoning engagement indicator seldom represented except for the programs that identified it as a component of their campus employment. Examples included data collection and analysis, inventory, shelving, and shifting projects, and independent scheduling activities. At one library, a student employment project was described this way: “We’re tracking all of our printer logs. So, we have a team collecting all of that data and then trying to figure out how to visualize it right now.” Such assignments can push student skills in

directions not traditionally considered in student library jobs, such as data analysis and representation.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is part of nearly every campus employment program that schedules multiple students to work at the same time, often without a full-time staff member present. In such an environment, students must consult with each other and solve problems collaboratively. Some of the components identified by participants include programs that have students train one another, check and evaluate each other's work, and provide peer reference assistance. Many participants also described putting experienced students in charge of planning or leading the training of new student workers.

Discussion with Diverse Others

Discussion with diverse others is an aspect of nearly all student employment in a public service role, including such responsibilities as helping patrons from different backgrounds, collaborating with a variety of coworkers, and participating in diversity training. Many interviewees described their student body as coming from many different backgrounds and highlighted specific populations that use the library, such as international students and public users on an open campus. Although all participants mentioned this engagement indicator, the list of actual responsibilities is short. Institutions that articulate values of equity, diversity, and inclusion may try to incorporate more proactive responsibilities and professional development that push students to engage with and reflect on differences among individual experiences.

Student-Faculty Interaction

Student-faculty interaction in the library employment context is available anytime that students work with librarians and other full-time staff on projects, in library committees, or through formal and informal mentorship arrangements. Specific examples of collaborative work with staff and faculty include information literacy instruction planning, teamwork at service desks, and contributing to collection development. Although the purpose of these activities is usually to support library services and programs, they also result in informal mentoring relationships and opportunities for students to make connections between their work and their future education or career.

Effective Teaching Practices

Effective teaching practices are enacted by those who supervise student employees in a variety of ways. In the context of training, these include setting a foundation; systematically approaching a coordinated, consistent training program; and using such tools as checklists and learning management systems. Training can also utilize games and competition, interactive activities, and multiple modes of learning. Beyond training, mechanisms to review and offer feedback for student employees include use of a job description with learning outcomes, students checking each other's work, and feedback provided through formal and informal evaluation. One interviewee describes an employment program that incorporates many of these elements:

I've created a Blackboard course where they have PowerPoints, and they do quizzes or activities. And we're training them on safety. They had to go up to our staff room—that's where we will push everyone if there's like an active shooter or something, and they had to take a selfie at the staff room so that way we knew that they knew where to go and they knew what key to use. We bring our campus police center, talk to them. I split them up into teams, and each team gets points if they complete a training module, each person who completes it gets points for their team. If they do

something good, or if we've noticed they've been on time to work, they get points. And at the end of the semester, the team with the most points wins the prize and they get to name their teams, so it's kind of like Harry Potter.

Quality of Interactions

Quality of interactions is built into employment environments where students work together, often building positive relationships with one another. It is also reinforced when the workplace supports relationship building between students and library staff and faculty by including them in collaborative work and problem-solving, having students participate in committees and team building activities, and encouraging mentoring relationships. Activities that promote quality interactions include orienting all students at the same time to build cohesion, using icebreakers and games, including student employees in staff training, and inviting them to staff parties and picnics.

Supportive Environment

A supportive environment includes such practices as allowing students to complete homework on the job, creating flexible schedules, finding work for students that connects to their own career goals, and providing support for general stress and mental health needs, both internally and through referrals to campus services. Although most participants affirm that the work environment for their student employees is supportive, many lack formalized support mechanisms or programs. Here's how one supervisor describes the situation:

Informally, my door is always open to talk about anything, including things that are not related to the job. Like if you're having a hard time in a class or you need advice on something going on in your life. I'm always happy to talk to you. Of course, there's also some reporting that has to happen there, so I make sure that's pretty clear. And we just encourage them to sort of allow the library to

be their safe place. The way that we wanted to be a safe place for our patrons, be a safe place for them, too, and that seems to be working. So far, I’m just hoping to make it a little bit more formalized as well in the coming year.

Not all library work clearly aligns with student engagement. Duties that are purely transactional, need little or no interaction with others, or demand minimal critical thinking may not support student engagement, even if they require specialized training. Examples of such work include basic circulation functions, cleaning, shelf reading, and emptying book drops. While these tasks need to get done, libraries can support their student employees’ engagement by complementing this work with some of the tasks mentioned previously and by offering student workers a supportive environment where they have opportunities to self-reflect, build relationships, and learn.

Table 2.
Student employment practices mapped to NSSE engagement indicators

NSSE engagement indicator	Student employment responsibilities and program components	
Higher order learning	Campus deliveries	Opening and closing building(s)
	Solving, making referrals, and tracking issues related to the building(s)	Building security
	Customer service, including dealing with difficult people	Peer research/reference assistance
	Tech support	Hardware/software updating, often with administrative rights on computers
	Work on the website	Teaching/student-led training
	Developing assessment tools	Developing

	<p>training/instruction content</p> <p>Searching for missing books Incorrect citation searching</p> <p>Searching/pulling books Cataloging</p> <p>Running social media Marketing/outreach planning</p> <p>Project management Planning meetings</p> <p>Participating in policy creation and/or strategic decision-making Participating in library committees</p>
Reflective and integrative learning	<p>Training/development that includes time for self-reflection related to career and other goals Iowa GROW* (Guided Reflection on Work) technique in training or conversations</p> <p>Responsibilities connected to career goals Referrals to career-related jobs</p> <p>Creating training materials Cross-training</p> <p>Creating book or other displays that integrate topics from the world around them Training on and using real-world tools or strategies, such as common software, project management approaches, etc.</p> <p>Witnessing/feeling direct impacts of budget/funding issues in the library and participating in discussion related to cuts and efficiencies</p>
Learning strategies	<p>Role playing New students “train” veteran students to reinforce what they have learned</p> <p>Summarizing what they learn Students teach each other</p> <p>Training material available for review</p>

<p>Quantitative reasoning</p>	<p>Data collection</p> <p>Asked to make decisions based on numbers</p> <p>Shelving books by call number</p> <p>Stacks maintenance</p>	<p>Data analysis</p> <p>Inventory</p> <p>Shifting books by call number</p> <p>Students responsible for creating the student employee schedule or other schedules</p>
<p>Collaborative learning</p>	<p>Checking and/or evaluating each other’s work</p> <p>Peer-to-peer reference assistance</p> <p>Students training each other</p>	<p>Collaborative problem-solving</p> <p>Student-led training/workshops</p> <p>Group projects</p>
<p>Discussions with diverse others</p>	<p>Helping diverse patrons</p> <p>Diversity training</p>	<p>Working with diverse coworkers</p>
<p>Student-faculty interaction</p>	<p>Collaborative work with librarians/other staff</p> <p>Participation on library committees</p>	<p>Informal or formalized librarian/library staff member mentorship</p> <p>Participating in policy creation or strategic decision-making</p>
<p>Effective teaching practices</p>	<p>Training via games/competitions</p> <p>Coordinated, regular training/professional development</p> <p>Multiple modes of learning in training</p>	<p>Students checking each other’s work</p> <p>Interactive training activities</p> <p>Training checklist</p>

	<p>Training via learning management system</p> <p>Job description with learning outcomes</p> <p>Learning outcomes in evaluation</p>	<p>Programmatic approach to student employment</p> <p>Students are evaluated or given feedback</p> <p>Immediate feedback from supervisor</p>
Quality of interactions	<p>Collaborative problem-solving</p> <p>Informal or formalized librarian/library staff member mentorship</p> <p>Team building</p>	<p>Collaborative work with librarians/other staff</p> <p>Participating in library committees</p> <p>Peer interactions</p>
Supportive environment	<p>Flexible scheduling to support student needs</p> <p>Helping students manage stress</p> <p>Referrals to campus support services, such as counseling or career centers</p> <p>Responsibilities related to career-related goals</p> <p>Elevated responsibilities</p>	<p>Homework allowed</p> <p>Mental health prioritized</p> <p>Referrals or letters of recommendation for career-related jobs</p> <p>Professional development (not skills training)</p>

*Source: University of Iowa, Division of Student Life, Iowa GROW®, 2021, <https://studentlife.uiowa.edu/initiatives/iowa-grow>.

Discussion

This study has identified many examples of campus employment responsibilities and program components that promote student engagement. Libraries are encouraged to incorporate these

examples into their own employment program to support student success. By framing their campus employment programs through the engagement indicators, academic libraries may find a common language with their institutional peers and leadership. They may also find new motivations and purposes for their student job programs with engagement as a goal alongside getting essential tasks done. Academic libraries that seek to align with campus student engagement goals have many options to do so.

The findings also provide insight into the evolving nature of student employment programs. Many participants talked about components in progress or improvements they hoped to make. Adopting a framework of student engagement for a campus job program need not be onerous or require massive, immediate change. Instead, small steps that meet the practical needs of the library can lead over time to more student engagement.

Of course, the interviews cannot uncover or elucidate all the possible student employee roles that occur in libraries. Additionally, the specific examples from this study, while adaptable, may not translate to meet a particular library's needs. In the following section, the authors identify general principles derived from the many examples that reflect the NSSE engagement indicators in library student employment. These principles serve as customizable recommendations, if the examples provided by participants are too limiting.

Student Employment Principles

1. Give student employees an opportunity to make decisions that require critical thinking skills.

For example, have students take leadership roles in planning, developing, and marketing an event, program, or initiative.

2. Help students reflect on what they have learned and accomplished through their roles and responsibilities and how the work connects to their career and life outside the library. For example, require reflective journaling or discussions as paid components of the program.
3. Be purposeful in student training and encourage students to actively participate and learn through a variety of means. Do not simply teach students to do a task, but help them build the tools and capacity to make meaningful decisions, lead significant initiatives, and manage their time appropriately. To make training most effective, include a variety of teaching strategies that cater to different learning styles.
4. Consider giving students assignments or projects that require them to analyze data or make decisions based on numbers. Invite them to participate in evidence-based decision-making.
5. Require students to work collaboratively with peers and library staff on projects and initiatives. Include peer-to-peer training and collaborative problem-solving opportunities whenever possible.
6. Give students mentorship opportunities outside the relationship with their supervisor. The mentors could be other library staff, seasoned student employees, or both.
7. Provide opportunities for student employees to work with and for a variety of people. For example, make outreach to special populations a priority for student workers. Supplement and expand student employees' interactions with diverse individuals through professional development and intentional opportunities to self-reflect on their experiences and those of others.
8. Give student employees clear expectations, but facilitate creativity and innovation through supportive relationships and good communication.

9. Strive to provide a meaningful experience for student employees. Supervisors should recognize the whole student experience and understand that student employment is a piece of a larger learning experience.
10. Trust students to be capable and rise to expectations. Some of the examples in this article might exceed the level of responsibility libraries expect of their student employees and can be uncomfortable or challenging to embrace. Finding low-stakes opportunities to test these ideas and reflecting on the question “What is the worst that could happen?” may be helpful for finding appropriate boundaries for student workers at your library.

Conclusion

Student employees have always been important to the success of the academic library. Libraries depend on them for much of the vital work that needs to be done. Their contributions often mean staffing the front lines and keeping the doors open—metaphorically and sometimes literally. While all the work that students do in libraries is important to the library, not every task contributes to student engagement as valued by higher education institutions. Libraries can use many low-barrier strategies to engage student employees and make their work more meaningful, while also supporting the institutional priority for student engagement. As libraries look to improve their student employment programs, the authors hope that the examples that map to NSSE engagement indicators, as well as the named principles rooted in that framework, will guide libraries toward new student worker opportunities and a new role for libraries in the support of student engagement.

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Appendix A

NSSE Engagement Indicators Revised for Library Work

NSSE engagement indicator	NSSE engagement indicator descriptions*	NSSE engagement indicator interpreted for library work
Higher order learning	Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by calling on students to engage in complex cognitive tasks requiring more than mere memorization of facts. This engagement indicator captures how much students' coursework emphasizes challenging cognitive tasks, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis.	Student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to engage in higher order thinking. This includes any activity involving complex cognitive tasks requiring more than mere memorization of facts, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis.
Reflective and integrative learning	Personally connecting with course material requires students to relate their understandings and experiences to the content at hand. Instructors emphasizing reflective and integrative learning motivate students to make connections between their learning and the world around them, reexamining their own beliefs and considering issues and ideas from others' perspectives.	The opportunity for student employees to reflect and relate their understandings and experiences to job tasks, roles, or responsibilities. This includes any activity which requires they make connections between their job (or tasks in their job) and the world around them. This reflection may cause them to reexamine their own ideas and consider issues or ideas from others' perspectives. It may make connections between their experiences on the job and their life in general.
Learning strategies	College students enhance their learning and retention by actively engaging with and analyzing course material rather than approaching learning as absorption. Examples of effective learning strategies	Student employees have the opportunity to actively engage with information/content when learning new things in their job. Examples of effective learning strategies could include having student employees

	include identifying key information in readings, reviewing notes after class, and summarizing course material. Knowledge about the prevalence of effective learning strategies helps colleges and universities target interventions to promote student learning and success.	identify key information from training/orientation, reviewing notes after learning new tasks, or summarizing what they've learned in training or orientation or other creative ways to actively engage student employees in their on-the-job learning.
Quantitative reasoning	The ability to use and understand numerical and statistical information in everyday life is an increasingly important outcome of higher education. All students, regardless of major, should have ample opportunities to develop their ability to reason quantitatively—to evaluate, support, and critique arguments using numerical and statistical information.	Student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to use quantitative reasoning. This includes any activity related to numbers or statistical information.
Collaborative learning	Collaborating with peers in solving problems or mastering difficult material deepens understanding and prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they encounter during and after college. Working on group projects, asking others for help with difficult material or explaining it to others, and working through course material in preparation for exams all represent collaborative learning activities.	Student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to collaborate with peers in solving problems or mastering difficult concepts. This includes work such as working on a group project, program, or in training, or working with a peer on solving a problem such as a research question or a subject question (such as tutoring).
Discussion with diverse others	Colleges and universities afford students new opportunities to interact with and learn from others with different backgrounds and life experiences. Interactions across difference, both inside and outside the classroom, confer educational benefits and prepare students for personal and civic participation in a diverse and interdependent world.	Opportunities for student employees to interact with people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

<p>Student-faculty interaction</p>	<p>Interactions with faculty can positively influence the cognitive growth, development, and persistence of college students. Through their formal and informal roles as teachers, advisers, and mentors, faculty members model intellectual work, promote mastery of knowledge and skills, and help students make connections between their studies and their future plans.</p>	<p>Opportunities for student employees to work with library staff/faculty in meaningful ways that promote growth, mastery of knowledge or skills, or help to make connections between their work and their future plans.</p>
<p>Effective teaching practices</p>	<p>Student learning is heavily dependent on effective teaching. Organized instruction, clear explanations, illustrative examples, and effective feedback on student work all represent aspects of teaching effectiveness that promote student comprehension and learning.</p>	<p>Student employment that is coordinated in a programmatic way that works toward training with clear explanations and expectations with effective feedback.</p>
<p>Quality of interactions</p>	<p>College environments characterized by positive interpersonal relations promote student learning and success. Students who enjoy supportive relationships with peers, advisers, faculty, and staff are better able to find assistance when needed, and to learn from and with those around them.</p>	<p>Opportunities for student employees to have supportive/quality relationships with peers and/or staff.</p>
<p>Supportive environment</p>	<p>Institutions that are committed to student success provide support and involvement across a variety of domains, including the cognitive, social, and physical. These commitments foster higher levels of student performance and satisfaction. This engagement indicator summarizes students’ perceptions of how much an institution emphasizes services and activities that support their learning and development.</p>	<p>Student employee programs that provide a supportive environment with components that help students grow academically, socially, and/or mentally and contribute to their overall well-being.</p>

*Source: National Survey of Student Engagement, “Engagement Indicators,” 2020, <https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/survey-instruments/engagement-indicators.html>.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Hello,

Today, I am going to be asking you about student employees at your library(ies). First, I'll have you respond to the open-ended question that I sent ahead of our phone call. Then, I will ask some additional questions that may ask you to go into more detail or repeat what you've already told me. The interview should take no more than 45 minutes and will be recorded.

Open-Ended Question

(Send this prompt ahead of call)

Could you please spend a few minutes talking about the different kinds of positions your student employees have in your library(ies). Please spend some time telling me about:

- Student employee roles and responsibilities
- The student employee timeline from hire to when the student quit/leaves—include information about training, professional development opportunities, assessment, additional benefits, opportunities, etc.

NSSE Engagement Indicator Questions

I am going to ask you specific questions about roles and responsibilities of your student employees and aspects of your student employee program. If the question does not apply to your students or program, that is okay.

Higher Order Learning

Are there student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to engage in higher order thinking? This includes any activity involving complex cognitive tasks requiring

more than mere memorization of facts, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis. If yes, please explain in detail.

If more explanation is required, we could prompt interviewee with the following:

Are student employees at your library

- applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations?
- analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts?
- evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source?
- forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information?

Reflective and Integrative Learning

Do students employed at your library have opportunities to reflect and relate their understandings and experiences to job tasks, roles, or responsibilities? This includes any activity which requires they make connections between their job (or tasks in their job) and the world around them. This reflection may cause them to reexamine their own ideas and consider issues or ideas from others' perspectives. It may make connections between their experiences on the job and their life in general. If yes, please explain in detail.

If more explanation is required, we could prompt interviewee with the following:

Have student employees at your library

- combined ideas from different experiences (classes, jobs, family, etc.) when completing work?
- connected their work to societal problems or issues?
- included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in work tasks or projects?
- examined the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic or issue?

- tried to better understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective?
- learned something on the job that changed the way they understand an issue or concept?
- connected ideas from their work to their prior experiences and knowledge?

Learning Strategies

Do students employed at your library have the opportunity to actively engage with information/content when learning new things in their job? For example, are your orientation/training materials interactive? Or do you utilize other creative ways to actively engage students in their learning? For example, have student employees at your library been asked to

- identify key information from training/orientation materials?
- review notes after learning new tasks?
- summarize what they learned in training or orientation?

Quantitative Reasoning

Are there student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to use quantitative reasoning? This includes any activity related to numbers or statistical information. For example, have student employees at your library been asked to

- reach conclusions based on analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)?
- use numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue?
- evaluate what others have concluded from numerical information?

Collaborative Learning

Are there student employee positions, roles, or responsibilities that require students to collaborate with peers in solving problems or mastering difficult concepts? For example, have student employees at your library been asked to

- work with other students on a project, program, or in training?
- work with a peer on solving a problem, such as a research question or a subject question (such as tutoring)?

Discussion with Diverse Others

Do students employed at your library have opportunities to interact with people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences? For example, have student employees at your library been asked to work with or help

- people from a race or ethnicity other than the student employee?
- people from an economic background other than the student employee?
- people with religious beliefs other than the student employee?
- people with political views other than the student employee?

Student/Faculty Interaction

Do student employees have opportunities to work with library staff/faculty in meaningful ways that promote growth, mastery of knowledge or skills, or help to make connections between their work and their future plans? This could include informal or formal relationships where student employees have the opportunity to do things like:

- discuss career or other future plans
- work with library staff on activities that fall outside of the formal student/supervisor relationship, such as committees, library advisory boards, project groups, etc.

- have a mentor/mentee relationship outside of typical supervisor/employee relationship.

Effective Teaching Practices

Is student employment at your library coordinated in a programmatic way that works toward training with clear explanations and expectations with effective feedback? For example, does your employment program

- explain job goals and requirements?
- deliver training in an organized way?
- use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points?
- provide feedback during the course of work?
- provided prompt and detailed feedback at the end of a semester or other employment period?

Quality of Interactions

Do student employees have the opportunity to have supportive/quality interactions with staff and/or other students? Do students have the opportunity to build relationships?

Supportive Environment

Do student employees work in a supportive environment that helps them grow academically, socially, and/or mentally and contributes to their overall well-being? Are there specific programs/components/stopgaps in place that ensure this environment?