

Unleash Your Library's HIPster: Transforming Student Library Jobs into High-Impact Practices

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Introduction

At a time when higher education is facing unprecedented external pressure to demonstrate its value and assess its outcomes, colleges and universities are eager to articulate the myriad ways they benefit students and society. Brick and mortar institutions are looking to differentiate themselves from each other as well as from other initiatives such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and for-profit online providers that could be seen as competitors. One way institutions are doing this is by offering and emphasizing high-impact practices. In higher education, high-impact practices (HIPs) are defined as transformative experiences that “require students to connect, reflect on, and integrate what they are learning from their classes with other life experiences.” HIPs enable students to “see firsthand the practical value of their classroom learning by applying it in real-life settings.”¹ Studies show that HIPs contribute to student engagement and success. Experiences such as study abroad, collaborative research, living learning communities, service learning or internships are commonly cited as HIPs. They share characteristics such as engaging students in sustained and purposeful tasks and decision-making; they offer students the opportunity to interact regularly and in meaningful ways with faculty, staff or other mentors and receive regular feedback; they expose students to people different from themselves; and they provide opportunities for students to apply, synthesize and reflect on knowledge.² These experi-

ences nurture skills that align with those that employers indicate they value when hiring college graduates. Employers cite critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communication skills, and the ability to apply learning to real-world situations as critical to workplace success.³ Those who employ student workers recognize that most, if not all, of these qualities can be developed and enhanced in student jobs. With intentionality and effort, student employment can be recast into a high-impact practice.

The Value of Student Work

Much has been written about the value of student employment, especially on-campus employment and part-time employment of fewer than 20 hours per week. While some studies suggest a correlation between part-time on-campus student employment and academic achievement,⁴ other findings are ambivalent.⁵ But there is no disputing that a significant number of college students are working (41% of full-time students and 72% of part-time students).⁶ Making efforts to incorporate more qualities associated with high-impact practices into the work experience is likely to benefit those students who work while in college.

While every campus has a wealth of examples of students engaging in meaningful and enriching work, there is a seeming reluctance to regard these experiences as HIPs, which may stem in part from the per-

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ceived roles and divisions between staff and faculty. Student supervisors are often not faculty, but rather “capable and trusted staff members who take an interest in students’ academic progress and general well-being—but, unlike faculty members, are not involved in evaluating their course work...” However, they “often become supportive mentors....[creating] relationships that nurture ongoing ties to the institution.”⁷ Because it is often staff who supervise students and faculty who oversee students’ academic pursuits, the opportunity to draw connections between the two—an essential element of HIPs—is not fully exploited. Cheng and Alcántara call for institutional policies treating student employment as an “educationally purposeful activity outside the classroom.”⁸ The University of Iowa’s Division of Student Life is answering that call with its IOWA GROW (Guided Reflection on Work) program.⁹ The program embraces the idea that student employment is a high-impact practice and has institutionalized reflective practices into the student employment experience. Libraries, that typically employ a significant number of students, are well-positioned to propel similar initiatives on college campuses.

Librarians Leading from the Middle

Academic libraries in the U.S. employ more than 20,000 student assistants annually.¹⁰ Librarians supervise and work closely with these students, often for several hours per week over several years. The relationship that student employees have with their supervisors and colleagues may be among the most sustained interactions they have with the institution during their college careers. Librarians enjoy similarities with non-faculty university staff, such as those in student support services and student affairs. They offer services, work with students outside the confines of the classroom, manage facilities, and typically employ a relatively substantial number of student employees. In many institutions, librarians are also integrally involved in academic matters, sometimes holding faculty status, often teaching classes, and in most cases working closely with teaching faculty. Librarians are

thus uniquely positioned to build connections between students’ curricular and work experiences.

Examples of libraries providing meaningful work experiences abound, suggesting that librarians understand the value to both students and libraries of creating rewarding work experiences for student employees.¹¹ It is less clear that these experiences, as well as those of other student work experiences on campus, are fully appreciated, acknowledged and promoted as HIPs to students, faculty, staff, administrators, employers and other stakeholders.

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire librarians hold faculty status and serve on several academic committees, including the academic policies committee, the assessment committee and the university liberal education committee, as well as the university senate. For several years, these committees were focused on revising the university’s liberal education core requirements, and in spring 2014 the campus adopted a new Liberal Education Framework.¹² Among the goals of the new framework is an integration goal, aimed at connecting students’ academic experiences to other experiences within and outside of the classroom. Throughout the process of developing and implementing this framework, this goal was largely discussed as the integration of courses, and less attention was focused on integrating curricular with extracurricular experiences. In fact, several faculty were resistant to the idea that extracurricular experiences could address liberal education core requirements. But a librarian saw the emerging Liberal Education Framework as an ideal opportunity to raise awareness of the value of on-campus student work. While faculty employ students, usually as research assistants in a one-on-one mentorship relationship, they are typically less likely to view themselves as “student supervisors” and arguably less focused on the student work experience than are those on campus who employ and supervise more students. Student supervisors, on the other hand, are quite cognizant of the importance of the student work experience, both to the campus and to the student, and aware of the learning experience that a campus job can afford students. However,

they are for the most part removed from curricular discussions and decisions. At UW—Eau Claire, many were unaware of the liberal education revisions taking place. A librarian, who bridges these two worlds, drew the connection between the on-campus student experience and the emerging liberal education goals.

UW—Eau Claire's McIntyre Library employs between 50 and 60 students. And while the library could independently enhance the work experience of its students by incorporating characteristics of HIPs and liberal education, real support for and formal recognition of the student work experience as an integral piece of a liberal education would require efforts extending beyond the library.

Forging Alliances

The librarian approached the director of financial aid about a possible collaboration. The director shared a keen interest in the student work experience, recognizing that the university employed roughly 4000 students in a wide range of roles, many of which were high quality experiences but had not been defined or articulated as HIPs. Recognizing the potential impact of the student work experience in light of the new liberal education learning goals, the librarian and the director of financial aid weighed options for beginning a campus conversation. The two decided to create a learning community, a professional development model that was already in place through the campus Center for Teaching and Learning (CETL). The learning communities typically bring faculty together to read and discuss issues related to teaching and learning. Learning communities often develop into "communities of practice" (COPs) that plan and implement projects based on ideas generated by the learning communities. Though a discussion group focusing on the student work experience could have formed and met independently of CETL, the two organizers were determined to offer this professional development opportunity under the auspices of CETL. Doing so would underscore the teaching and learning aspect of student employment that was the foundation of the idea. And it would include not only

faculty but staff, emphasizing the teaching and mentorship roles of those who work with students outside of the classroom. Initially there was some resistance, as CETL typically provided support for classroom teaching. However, the two made a case for the learning community, citing the liberal education learning goals under development and literature supporting the educational value of student work. Ultimately the "Maximizing the Student Work Experience Learning Community" was offered in spring 2012 through CETL. Twenty one faculty and staff from across campus signed up and met biweekly to discuss selected readings, share philosophies and develop strategies for maximizing the educational value of student work experiences. Sessions focused on four themes:

- Contribution of the work experience to the liberal education goals
- Supervisor as educator/mentor
- Enhancing quality of the work experiences
- Defining the parameters of on-campus internships

A fifth theme on generational differences in the workplace was added at the request of participants.

The series began with participants reading the draft of the university's Liberal Education Framework¹³ that was being considered, discussed and debated by the university senate, several academic committees and faculty throughout the institution. Not surprisingly, this introduction to the Liberal Education Framework was the first time that many staff members were made aware of an issue that had been consuming the energies and attention of their faculty colleagues for years. It didn't take long for learning community participants to identify goals in the new Liberal Education Framework to which the student work experience contributed. For example, the goal to "develop intellectual and practical skills, including... inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, qualitative literacy, information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving" immediately had participants talking about the experiences their student employees had that developed these skills. Examples included students

conducting interviews and writing news releases for the news bureau, solving technology problems at the campus help desk, developing programming for the residence halls, serving as peer guides for international students and responding to reference questions at the library reference desk.

The second segment of the discussion series focused on supervisors as student mentors and educators, exploring the similarities and differences between these roles. There was hesitation among some staff to refer to themselves as educators, and frankly there was resistance among some faculty to cede any part of that role to colleagues outside of the classroom. However, the liberal education goal of “integrat[ing] learning across courses and disciplines, and between campus and community life” offered an invitation—even a mandate—for those in and out of the classroom to collaborate in the liberal education mission.

Once learning community participants began to embrace their roles in contributing to the liberal education experience of their students, the discussions turned to more practical matters such as enhancing the work experiences and helping students to recognize and articulate the value of those experiences. Acknowledging that the development of a meaningful work experience began before a student was hired, participants practiced rewriting student position descriptions. As the first communication that student employers will have with their student workers, the wording of the position description could begin to model and convey the value of an on-campus work experience. Suggestions included rethinking the title of the position itself to explicitly including a section on the position description that spells out the benefits to the student of holding such a position. For example, the library changed the title of a student position from “Reference Desk Student” to “Library Research & Instruction Assistant.” Included in the position description was a section with the heading “Benefits” that included:

- Development of high level research skills to assist in academic and lifelong learning
- Mentoring from library faculty and staff

- Opportunity for progressively independent work and increased responsibility
- Development of valuable professional skills, including problem-solving, communication, customer service and critical thinking.
- Increased awareness of the many different aspects of campus life and activities

The interview process is another area that was identified for its potential as a teachable moment. Though many learning community participants admitted to conducting minimal, if any, interviews in their hiring processes, they recognized that this could be the only opportunity some students would get to practice interviewing before they entered the post-graduation job market. Treating the hiring process professionally, by modeling professional behavior, asking “real” interview questions, requesting resumés and references, and even providing some feedback afterwards, provides students with valuable experience. Learning community members considered approaches for building upon this theme once students were hired. They discussed using periodic performance reviews as opportunities to guide students in reflecting on their work experience and its connection to their academic endeavors and future goals. Participants turned to the University of Iowa’s IOWA GROW (Guided Reflection on Work) program for inspiration. The IOWA GROW program, recognizing that students may not always draw connections between their jobs and classroom learning, promotes conversations between students and their supervisors built on four questions:

- How is this job fitting in with your academics?
- What are you learning here that’s helping you in school?
- What are you learning in class that you can apply here at work?
- Can you give me a couple of examples of things you’ve learned here that you think you’ll use in your chosen profession?¹⁴

As with many of the ideas that were generated during the course of the learning community discus-

sions, participants—including the librarian—took these ideas back to their departments and experimented with implementing them. In the library, these four initial questions led to discussions with the students about how their library jobs might be enhanced to strengthen this connection between the student's academic interests and their job. As librarians learned more about the students' interests and abilities, they were able to assign projects to the students that would utilize their strengths. One student, for example, was considering a photography major, so he was tasked with developing a collection of stock library photos that librarians could use in teaching, promotional materials and presentations. Another student was enrolled in an events planning class and was tapped to assist with planning upcoming events in the library. A marketing student was tasked with creating promotional videos for the library.

Moving Ideas to Action

Due to popularity, a second learning community was offered the following semester, and participants continued to consider and implement ideas generated from the shared readings and discussions into their own practices. But organizers were still committed to making an impact at the institutional level. To that end a community of practice (COP) was formed to bring ideas emanating from the learning communities to campuswide action. The COP pulled together eight people, including the librarian, active in student employment on campus. Building on a recommendation that emerged from the learning communities, it set out to create a series of workshops for student supervisors that would empower them to see themselves as mentors and educators, and foster the connection between the liberal education learning goals and the work experience of students. The COP developed three 3-hour workshops:

- *Nuts and bolts.* This workshop introduces the concept of “supervisor as educator” and the liberal education learning goals. Participants engage in hands-on activities to develop meaningful position descriptions and en-

hance hiring and orientation processes to model professionalism.

- *Leadership for Supervisors of Student Employees.* This workshop focuses on identifying and developing leadership styles as they relate to supervising and mentoring students. Participants use case studies to reflect on their own leadership style predispositions and expand their repertoire of approaches to deal with issues such as providing constructive feedback. Participants explore the concept of situational leadership for managing and mentoring students in various circumstances and levels of development.
- *Maximizing the Student Work Experience.* The third workshop in the series expands on the previous workshops by coaching supervisors in conducting structured conversations with student employees on identifying and articulating skills they have acquired. Participants explore more deeply the concepts of high-impact practice and professionalism. A panel of area employers shares their perspectives on characteristics and attributes valued in employees.

The series of workshops, piloted in 2013, continues to be revised and offered twice a year. Facilitated primarily by members of the original COP, the workshops are attracting additional presenters and participants who bring diverse and valuable experience and perspectives to the project. The impact of the workshops is beginning gain traction at the institutional level. The director of financial aid's position was reconfigured to include “student work” in her title, providing a home and oversight to continued efforts. The university provost and chancellor have expressed support for the work being done, and workshop evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive. As the university community continues its efforts to develop criteria for assessing the new liberal education learning outcomes, it remains to be seen how the work experience will be viewed and incorporated, but the groundwork has been laid and the conversations are in progress.

Bringing it Home

The value of the librarian's involvement in the campus student work initiatives has been twofold. First, by championing the potential of student work, she has played a role in raising awareness and quality of student work experiences across campus. Second, by working with a wide range of university colleagues, the librarian has been exposed to the collective expertise and ideas of effective and innovative managers and educators across campus. Gradually these ideas are being implemented in the library. For example, in addition to ideas mentioned above, such as revising the hiring and review processes, the librarian implemented regular departmental meetings for her student assistants. The ability to work in teams is a skill valued not only in the university liberal education learning goals, but also by potential employers. Students who staff the reference desk usually do not work together, so implementing regular meetings gave the students the opportunity to meet each other and coalesce as a team. Initially, the meetings focused on training in areas such as customer service, conducting a reference interview, and exploring databases. As students became increasingly comfortable with their colleagues, the meetings evolved into brainstorming sessions, where students floated ideas for improving library services. Librarians observed student employees becoming more engaged and invested in the library, and more confident in sharing ideas for improvement.

Seeing the positive outcome from the meetings of a relatively small library department led to the idea of expanding meetings to students in other departments. A recent student meeting focused on developing resumés and articulating student library work effectively—a direct result of the supervisor workshops. A staff member from the Career Services office facilitated the meeting, and an invitation to this meeting was extended to all library student employees. In considering how to best reflect their library jobs on their resumés, students were asked questions similar to those adapted from IOWA GROW and used in individual performance reviews. The group discussion yielded wide-ranging and insightful reflections, aug-

menting students' individual perceptions with those of their peers on the value of their work experiences. For example, when asked what skills they were developing in their jobs, a reference desk student replied, "Asking questions. Listening is more important than having an immediate answer." A technical services student offered an unanticipated response, "Creativity. When I have to mend a book I'm given free rein in deciding how best to do it." Her comment sparked a conversation on the creative aspects of jobs that students hadn't previously thought of in that way.

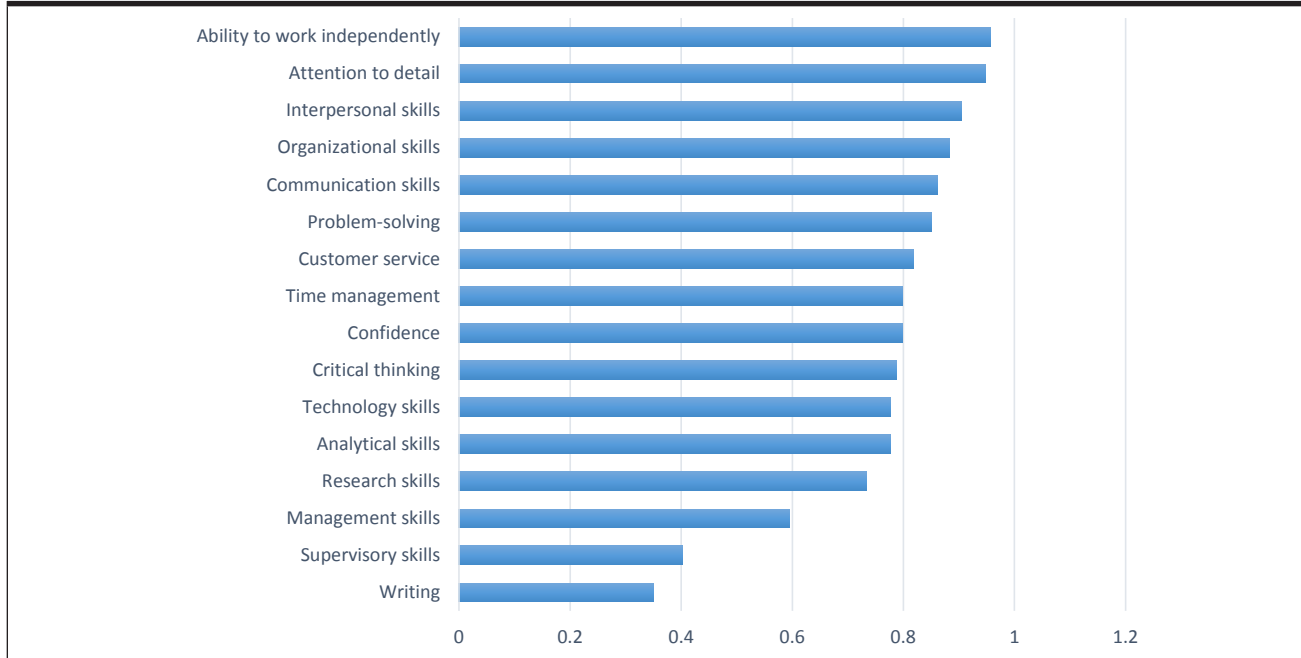
Assessment

As the library becomes more intentional about elevating student work experiences to HIPs, it is mindful of assessing its efforts. A survey of students employed in the library during the past 10 years was conducted in January 2015. Of approximately 250 students and former students contacted via email or Facebook, 96 completed the survey, for a response rate of 38 percent. Intended to serve as a baseline survey that can be repeated in a couple of years, after more efforts to implement high-impact practices have been put in place, the initial survey nonetheless provided valuable feedback on student perceptions of their work experiences.

Students were asked to identify to what extent they believed they learned or developed a set of skills while working in the library. Responses varied depending on the nature of the students' work, with results skewing toward the more numerous technical service students. The ability to work independently, attention to detail, and interpersonal skills ranked high overall. Students in public service also identified communication skills, customer service and problem-solving among the skills they obtained. Technical service students cited analytical skills, organizational skills, and time management. A majority of students indicated that they had learned or developed skills aligning with liberal education learning goals, such as information literacy (research skills), critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and analytical skills.

March 25–28, 2015, Portland, Oregon

FIGURE 1
Student Perception of Skills Learned Working in Library (% Indicating “A Lot” Or “Some”)



We have long suspected, as have others on campus who employ students, that the student work experience often influences a student's future career path. We asked survey respondents if they had enrolled in, or ever considered enrolling in, a graduate program in library science. We then asked those who responded affirmatively (59%) if they had been thinking about it before working at McIntyre Library. Fifty-eight percent responded no. If part of a liberal education is exposing students to new ideas and possibilities, there is no question that the work experience does just that.

Conclusion

UW—Eau Claire, as part of the University of Wisconsin system, is facing unprecedented budget cuts from the state that threaten to increase the economic burden on students while drastically reducing the number of instructors on campus and the ability to maintain or expand traditionally recognized high-impact practices. Yet the university administration has stated that HIPs remain a priority even in the face of substantially reduced resources. At the same time, students are facing increased pressure to work while in school. These unfortunate circumstances may provide a new land-

scape in which those who have been resistant to recognizing extracurricular experiences on campuses as valid educational experiences are willing to give them credit, figuratively or literally. Efforts to enhance and recognize the student work experience can only benefit students and colleges, especially in challenging times, and librarians can be the ones leading this charge.

Notes

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