

# Conditions Contributing to the Efficient Service of Student Assistants in a Selected Group of College Libraries

*Miss Brown has served in various capacities at the Vassar College Library and in the fall of 1943 became reference librarian there. She here summarizes the findings of a master's essay accepted by the School of Library Service at Columbia University in 1942.*

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES of efficient student assistant service have been formulated in the standard works on college and university library administration.<sup>1</sup> They may be expressed briefly as follows:

The authority to appoint student assistants should be vested in the librarian or a member of the library staff.

The librarian should have the right to select student assistants solely on the basis of their fitness to do the work required.

The librarian should have authority to discharge any incompetent student assistants.

It is most efficient to use student assistants for duties which do not require much training or experience.

There should be a comparatively small

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brown, C. H., and Bousfield, H. G. *Circulation Work in College and University Libraries*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1933, p. 53-60. McCrum, B. P. *An Estimate of Standards for a College Library*. 2d ed. Lexington, Washington and Lee University, 1937, p. 118-20. Randall, W. M. *The College Library*. Chicago, American Library Association and University of Chicago Press, 1932, p. 64-65. Randall, W. M., and Goodrich, F. L. D. *Principles of College Library Administration*. 2d ed. Chicago, American Library Association and University of Chicago Press, 1941, p. 129-39.

number of student assistants working relatively long hours of service rather than many students serving only a few hours weekly. Fifteen hours per week is a suggested standard for most types of work. No student should be permitted to work so many hours as to endanger his health or academic standing.

There should be a sliding scale of payment, based upon duties assigned and the efficiency with which they are performed.

So far there is agreement among the authorities. But upon the type of work to be assigned to student assistants there is some disagreement which apparently springs from a difference in philosophy regarding the function of the college library. One school of thought believes that the student should be assigned to his duties only with regard to the furtherance of the work of the library, which is to give service to its clientele. In accordance with this viewpoint, students would be assigned to shelving, writing overdues and waiting list notices, filing cards and performing other clerical duties, reading shelves, working at the assigned reading desk if it is separate from the loan desk, delivering books from the stacks, and messenger service. The other theory regards the college library as an educational insti-

tution in its own right and holds that it should endeavor to develop the individual capacities of its student assistants. According to this conception of student assistant service, students would be used in projects which utilize their subject knowledge.

The present study was made in the academic year 1940-41 to bring the evidence of current practice to the consideration of the problem. It surveys the actual conditions governing the service of student assistants in a group of six college libraries at that time. The libraries included in the study are those of liberal arts colleges for women: Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley. Since the study assumes that student assistants should not be used for work on the professional level, the fact that the six libraries included are able to pay sufficient salaries is important.

Departmental libraries have been included in the study where they are under the jurisdiction of the central library. In addition, the art and music libraries at Vassar College, whose personnel are responsible to the academic departments concerned, have been included. These libraries have each a professional librarian on their staffs.

In this study the definition of student assistant has been expanded to include N.Y.A. assistants, students appointed on grants or working scholarships, and student assistants in departmental libraries paid by academic department funds.

#### *Techniques Employed*

The technique employed in this study was a combination of "information slips" and personal interviews. The information slips were typed three-by-five inch forms to be filled out with the following data:

name of library, name of student assistant (for identification purposes), job description, job qualifications, number of hours per week, rate of payment, paid by (*e.g.*, library budget, N.Y.A.). These slips, with one sample form made out correctly, were sent to the cooperating libraries to be filled out by the staff members in charge of the student assistants' work. Enough slips were sent for one to be used for each student. The slips from each library were returned and examined for clarity and completeness before the personal interview.

The interview was in every case with the librarian and/or the staff member in charge of student assistant work. The interview covered the following points: conditions of appointment and discharge of student assistants, departmental library practice, group training of student assistants, the conditions governing clerical assistance in the library, special appropriations for student assistant service, and the attitude of the library toward students interested in the library profession. The opportunity was taken during the interview to correct any vagueness or omission discovered in the information slips.

#### *Conditions Governing Appointment and Dismissal*

The study shows that in all but one instance, the control of the appointment and dismissal of student assistants is vested in the library. At one college a group of five students is assigned to work in the library, in return for which they receive grants-in-aid. These students give five or six hours a week service in the library. The library has no part in choosing these assistants nor can it dismiss them. The "grant girls" are therefore given the simplest kind of work, unless they have some

TABLE I  
Libraries Using Student Service for the Jobs Reported and Total Number of  
Students Employed in Each Job<sup>1</sup>

Jobs.(in order of frequency)	Number of students employed	Libraries
Shelving	60	MH, R, V, W
Loan desk work*	48	B, MH, R, S, V, W
Charge of department library for time scheduled	35	Vd, Wd
Typing	22	MH, S, V, W
Assistance at reserve desk	17	MH, R
Reference room assistance	13	V
Shelf reading	13	V, W
Filing	12	MH, V, W
Cleaning books	8	V
Marking new books	6	MH, V, W
Collecting books for reserve	5	R
Plating	5	V, W
Putting pamphlets in binders	5	Vd
Typing card index for Gramophone Shop Monthly Record Supplement	5	Wd
Binding sheet music in pamphlet binders	4	Wd
Withdrawing cards from catalog and shelflist	4	S, V
Assistance in putting books on reserve and taking them off reserve	3	MH, S, V, W
Cataloging phonograph records	3	Vd
Checking reserves, books, and records in morning	3	Vd, Wd
Counting circulation	3	Vd, Wd
Cutting pages	3	V
Mending books	3	MH, V
Mounting photographs	3	Vd
Order department assistance	3	V
Preliminary arranging of shelflist and catalog cards	3	S, V
Accessioning	2	S, Vd
Assistance in browsing room	2	MH, R, S
Charge of student assistant substitutes	2	V, Vd
Checking overdues	2	MH, V
Checking books in catalog	2	MH
Collecting samples of binding and labels	2	V
Mend routine assistance	2	V
Opening, stamping, distributing periodicals	2	MH
Pasting labels on books	2	V
Printing labels for books	2	V
Recording and marking additions to series	2	S
Reference work	2	R
Searching lost books	2	MH, Vd
Alphabetizing for catalog department	1	W
Assisting with exchange list	1	MH
Care of program file	1	Vd
Charge of fines notices	1	Vd
Charge of performance collection in music library	1	Vd

<sup>1</sup> Explanation of symbols used in tables

- B Barnard College Library
- MH Mount Holyoke College Library
- R Radcliffe College Library
- S Smith College Library
- V Vassar College Library
- W Wellesley College Library
- d Departmental library
- \* Explanation given in text

Jobs (in order of frequency)	Number of students employed	Libraries
Charge of periodicals	1	Vd
Charge of reserve shelves	1	Vd
Charge of student assistant accounts	1	Vd
Charge of supplies	1	Vd
Charge of whole library in evening	1	R
Classifying stereopticon slides	1	Vd
Collecting programs of college events	1	V
Filing catalog cards	1	Vd
Filing, marking, mounting letters and news clippings	1	R
Harvard messenger	1	R
Helping with college catalogs	1	MH
Indexing Nagel's <i>Musikarchiv</i>	1	Wd
Lettering	1	Vd
Mail	1	MH
Making and labeling microfilm slides	1	Wd
Messenger service to department libraries	1	S
Posting symphony programs and arranging reserves of appropriate scores and records	1	Wd
Preliminary filing of shelflists	1	S
Printing slide labels	1	Vd
Putting away phonograph records	1	Vd
Putting department libraries in order	1	S
Recording and filing extra copies of college publications	1	V
Slide mending	1	Vd
Sorting and filing photographs	1	Vd
Sorting slides into categories	1	Vd
Sunday doorkeeping	1	V
Treating leather books	1	Vd
Typing labels for phonograph record envelopes	1	Wd
Withdrawing books from library collection	1	V
Working with reference librarian, checking indices, etc.	1	W
Wrapping and labeling newspapers in packages	1	V

special skill such as typing or prove to have other particular qualifications.

Librarians cooperating in the study tend to appoint student assistants on the basis of their qualifications for the work to be assigned, but in several situations the factor of financial need must be regarded first.

Wellesley College Library makes use of student assistants who are recipients of cooperative scholarships. They give a definite number of hours' service to the library in return for a scholarship. Students who are eligible for the awards are sent to the

library from the dean's office. The librarian selects from among the applicants on the basis of their qualifications for the jobs available.

At Mount Holyoke College Library financial need is a requirement for appointment unless the student is interested in library work as a profession.

In the appointment of part of its student assistants, the Vassar library must assume the teaching function or lose control of a considerable annual income for the employment of student service. In 1928

the Class of 1912 of Vassar College established the Class of 1912 Self-Help Fund with the purpose of "Provision for remuneration to students for work of some educational value." Since November 1928 the income has been voted to the library.

All the libraries concerned show special consideration for applicants interested in library work as a possible career.

### *Work Performed*

The findings of this study in regard to the work performed by student assistants in the selected group of college libraries are presented in the form of a frequency table (Table I). An analysis of the job descriptions given on the information slips shows that the grouping of student assistant duties follows no set pattern. At Radcliffe College Library a student assistant collects books for reserve; at Vassar library a student assigned to loan desk work collects books for reserve, files cards, and does odd jobs; at Wellesley a student works with the reference librarian checking indices and bibliographies; at Vassar a reference room assistant checks bibliographies and shelves reference collection books. The table is obviously thrown out by the occurrence of such overlapping terms.

While loan desk work is the one type of work common to student assistants in all the libraries included in the study, it makes a great difference whether the student assistant is assigned to public service work or is employed at the desk only to relieve the regular staff members of routine duties such as filing cards, looking up call numbers in the files, sending notices, and various other odd jobs. The situation is further affected if the library maintains a separate reference department or if refer-

TABLE II  
Qualifications Required for Student Assistant  
Work in Order of Frequency of Mention

Qualification	Frequency of mention
Accuracy	68
Availability at irregular hours	54
Good health and eyesight	35
Need	28
Ability to type	26
Ability to use card catalog	21
Neatness	21
Ability to take responsibility	20
Experience	15
Quickness	10
Manual dexterity	9
Availability during vacations	8
Good printing	8
Knowledge of music	8
Punctuality	8
Careful attention to detail work	7
Interest	6
Knowledge of art	6
Judgment	5
Knowledge of botany	5
Knowledge of French	5
Knowledge of zoology	5
General promise	4
Good handwriting	4
Knowledge of German	4
Knowledge of the classification	4
Dependability	3
Pleasing personality	3
Good at handling student requests	2
Initiative	2
Knowledge of Italian	2
Knowledge of Spanish	2
Thoroughness	2
Ability to get along with people	1
Ability to center "by eye"	1
Bibliographical aptitude	1
Contact with student life	1
Executive ability	1
Familiarity with collection	1
Pleasing appearance	1
Sense of organization	1
Willingness to cooperate	1

ence and circulation work are combined at one desk.

At the Vassar and Wellesley libraries students work at the loan desk as assistants to regular staff members. There is a sepa-

rate, professional reference service. At Mount Holyoke library, where there is no separate reference department, a student assistant does service work at the main desk during the busy hours under the supervision of a staff member. At Mount Holyoke and Smith libraries a student is left in charge of the loan desk during meal hours. At Radcliffe and Barnard libraries student assistants do reference and circulation duty at the main desk.

For types of work performed by student assistants in one library only, the wording of the job description as given in the information slip has been preserved.

The one type of work in which student assistants are engaged in all the libraries studied is loan desk work. Four libraries use students in shelving, typing, and putting books on reserve and removing them from reserve. The largest number of students is engaged in shelf work, although two libraries, Barnard and Smith, use page boys for this service.

#### *Qualifications Required in Relation to Special Abilities*

The qualifications reported by the cooperating libraries as requirements for student assistant jobs are presented in Table II in order of frequency of mention. An analysis of the table suggests that the qualifications may be roughly grouped into seven categories:

1. Personality traits such as intelligence, ability to get along with people
2. Work traits such as accuracy, careful attention to detail work
3. Skills, such as ability to type, good printing
4. Experience
5. Health
6. Need
7. Other qualifications: subject knowledge, availability at irregular hours, ability

to use card catalog, knowledge of the classification, familiarity with the collection, and contact with student life.

It is evident that the seventh category comprises qualifications particularly related to the abilities or conditions of college students. Since the information slips recorded both job descriptions and job qualifications, it was possible from them to ascertain for what work these special abilities or conditions were required. Table III presents a list of the jobs assigned to student assistants in the selected group of college libraries, based upon these qualifications.

Since it may be assumed that it is desirable to use student assistants for work which is particularly related to their special abilities, the foregoing analysis will suggest to college librarians situations in which student service may be successfully employed. However, it must be remembered that the table represents current practice and cannot be accepted as a satisfactory standard. The use of student assistants for reference work, for instance, may be criticized on the grounds that such work is entirely on the professional level.

#### *Factors Governing Cost*

The cost of student assistant service depends both upon rate of payment and upon the expenditure in staff time. All the libraries in the group make use of a graduated scale of payment. The median rate of payment in the libraries studied ranges from thirty to fifty cents an hour. Factors determining the rate of payment include: type of work assigned; type of work assigned considered with the individual student's proficiency, experience, and hours; length of service; undesirable hours.

It was impossible within the scope of

TABLE III

Jobs Assigned to Student Assistants for Which Qualifications Particularly Related to the Special Abilities or Conditions of College Students are Required

Qualifications	Frequency of mention of qualifications	Work assigned
Availability at irregular hours	54	Charge of department library Loan desk work Reference room assistant Shelving books from loan desk
Subject knowledge	37	
Knowledge of music	8	Arranging reserves of scores and records for symphony programs Cataloging phonograph records Charge of department library Charge of performance collection Classifying stereopticon slides Indexing Nagel's <i>Musikarchiv</i> Typing card index for Gramophone Shop Monthly Record Supplement
Knowledge of French	5	Harvard messenger work Indexing Nagel's <i>Musikarchiv</i>
Knowledge of German	4	Order department assistance Harvard messenger work Indexing Nagel's <i>Musikarchiv</i>
Knowledge of Spanish	2	Order department assistance
Knowledge of Italian	2	Indexing Nagel's <i>Musikarchiv</i>
Knowledge of art	6	Order department assistance Charge of department library Sorting slides into categories
Knowledge of botany	5	Charge of department library
Knowledge of zoology	5	Charge of department library
Ability to use card catalog	21	Adding call numbers to lists Collecting books for reserve Harvard messenger work Loan desk work Mend routine assistance Order department assistance Reference and circulation work at main desk Reference and circulation work in reserve book room Working with reference librarian, checking indices, etc.
Knowledge of the classification	4	Shelving
Contact with student life	1	Collecting programs of college events
Familiarity with collection	1	Circulation and reference work in reserve book room

the study to chart the amount of staff time required for the training and supervision of student assistants over a definite period. It may be assumed, however, that on a given volume of work, the smaller the number of student assistants and the greater the number of hours each student serves, the more economical will be their training and supervision. The median number of hours worked weekly by student assistants in the selected group of college libraries ranges from 5.03 to 10 hours. It thus appears that there is a marked tendency for student assistants in these libraries to work fewer hours than is recommended. This may be due to a number of causes. Since the colleges in the group are predominantly undergraduate, with the majority of students carrying the equivalent of four courses, the average student has not much time to devote to self-help work. Since the colleges have comparatively generous scholarship endowments, there may not be the financial necessity among the student body which exists elsewhere. Also there seems to be a general care among the college administrations concerned that no student sacrifice her health, scholastic achievement, or normal social life to too much self-help activity.

To reduce the high cost in staff time for training and supervision, several libraries use methods of group instruction. These include personal instruction to several new students at one time whenever possible, the use of mimeographed instruction sheets, the distribution of a booklet of general directions, and the calling of student assistant staff meetings. This last practice is valued as promoting a feeling of "belonging" to the library which does much to heighten morale and is reflected in more efficient work.

Another means of cutting the cost of student assistant service is the systematic rating of each student's work to determine whether she is performing work of the quantity and quality to be expected. The rating will furnish definite, impersonal criticism to aid the unsatisfactory student to increase her efficiency or, failing in that, will afford a concrete basis for her dismissal. Mount Holyoke library uses an employee rating scale designed to guide the supervisor in grading the assistant on eighteen separate points: output-quantity, output-quality, accuracy, organization of work, attitude to job and organization, cooperativeness, disposition, dependableness, persistence, vitality, initiative, tact, poise, ability to learn, power of analysis, ability to meet people, supervisory ability, and personal appearance.

#### *Nonstudent Clerical Service*

In the experience of the libraries concerned in this survey, it has been desirable and possible to replace some part of student service with full-time nonstudent clerical workers. It has been found that clerical workers produce better results as typists than do student assistants. The employment of a clerical worker to replace several student assistants working an equivalent number of hours is a great saving in the cost of staff time for training and supervision.

All the librarians cooperating in the study, however, emphasized the greater leeway of irregular time which an amount of money spent for student service can give over the same amount spent for clerical service. Student service is, therefore, preferable for work requiring scheduling at irregular hours, such as loan desk assistance.

### *Recommendations*

That there is need for the introduction of personnel management methods in the appointment and supervision of library student assistants, is suggested by the lack of uniformity in the jobs assigned and in the qualifications required in the selected group of college libraries. The adoption of accepted personnel management methods and techniques will render more efficient the service of student assistants in any situation.

The first steps should be a simple job analysis, a description of each job now assigned to a student assistant, and a statement of the qualifications necessary for the job. With these facts before him, the librarian may decide whether or not there are elements of special abilities needed or of irregular time to be covered which make the job especially suited to student assistants.

In the second place, the librarian should make use of all available means to select student assistants who have the required qualifications. He has at his service the health records of the students, the record of the courses they have taken, and their grades and class schedules. He may also give prospective assistants simple tests for skills, such as informal tests for typing, lettering, use of the card catalog, and shelving. More attention will doubtless be paid in the future to testing the mental, work, and personality traits of prospective student assistants. A study recently completed at Iowa State University Library indicated that the National Institute of Industrial Psychology Clerical Test scores and the American Council on Education Psychological Examination scores are of value in predicting success of student

assistants in college library work.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the practices observed in the group of college libraries deserve wider adoption: the use of the rating scale, the establishment of a weekly minimum of hours below which no student would be permitted to work (Wellesley's minimum of six hours might be considered suitable for an undergraduate college library of this type), the adoption of a graduated scale of payment based upon the type of work performed, and the use of various means of group instruction.

However great an effort the librarian makes to assign jobs in accordance with the interest and special abilities of his student assistants, a large amount of routine work must be done. The members of the library staff who supervise the work of student assistants may render a great service to the library and to the students by interpreting to them the place of such routine tasks in a larger enterprise.

The training and supervision of library student assistants offer a great problem in that they vary in quality with the teaching and executive abilities of the staff members in charge. A step in the right direction is the inclusion in library school curricula of courses in personnel problems and practical psychology for professional workers. Librarians might well consider the values of such training in their plans for the continuing education of their staff members. A series of round table discussions on the problems of student assistant supervision might solve the difficulty in some situations.

<sup>2</sup> Oberheim, Grace M. "Predicting Success of Student Assistants in College Library Work." October 1941. Columbia University, School of Library Service, master's essay, p. 89.