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Cover Page Footnote

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Attitudes About and the Effects of the Use of Student Assistants in Special Collections and Archives

Carol Waggoner-Angleton

Introduction

As university special collections and archives attempt to deal with a continuing backlog of processing collections, the present economic situation, and the adoption of new processing philosophies, managers are impelled to examine the role of student assistants. This article explores the history of using student assistants in libraries and archives to determine whether using them can positively impact special collections and archives as well as how managers' attitudes about using them affect students' assigned tasks and duties.

In 1998, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) conducted a survey of the state of special collections libraries in North America, releasing the final report in 2001. While *Special Collections in ARL Libraries* reported the state of special collections divisions to be good, this report was one of the first to highlight the high rates of unprocessed and uncataloged material in all formats contained in institutions. By 2003, the term "hidden collections" described "large unprocessed or under-processed backlogs of rare book, manuscript, and archival materials [that had become] a major problem in research libraries around the country."¹ Barbara M. Jones's white paper, *Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries*, was one of the first to articulate the risks to the collections themselves if they remained hidden, risks that ranged from damage and theft of material, impedance of scholarship, and expense to the institution. This paper also started important discussions on the benefit of increased access to special collections materials, the

¹ Judith Panitch, *Special Collections in Libraries: The Results of the 1998 Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2001): 49-50; Barbara M. Jones, *Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries* (white paper, Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections, 2003): 1.

definition of access, and the necessity for different levels of access to aid discovery.

Clearly, coming to grips with “hidden collections” will mean for most repositories an additional expenditure of resources, in money, time, and available employees. Most of the survey libraries in *Special Collections in ARL Libraries* maintain special collections on a minimal budget, with 55.8% having less than \$1,000 per year to spend on support (staff and supplies). Of libraries surveyed, 23% reported less than one full time employee (FTE) and 52% reported no paraprofessional staffing. To process collections, 82% used professional staff, 53% used paraprofessionals, and 52% used student employees.² In 2006, staffing had risen somewhat, librarians working in ARL libraries averaged 2.8 FTE and assigned staff – staff designated for special collections, not temporary staff or “floaters” – to 2.3 FTE on average. An unpublished comparison in 2012 suggested that librarians assigned to special collections averaged 2.1 FTE librarians with 2.7 FTE for professional staff and .64 student assistants. Of the 51 libraries included in this comparison, 41% had more than one FTE librarian and 57% had more than one FTE staff, with only 15% employing student assistants. Part-time staff was not accounted for.³ Submission reporting instructions allow for several employees to be counted as one FTE, therefore it is possible that institutions could be employing several part-time individuals that report as one FTE librarian or professional staff. Combining several individuals to fill one FTE position could create a discontinuity in the workflow, especially in the processing of collections.

More Product Less Process (MPLP) is at the same time a philosophical shift in processing theory as well as a suggested workflow process. Greene and Meissner’s 2005 paper, which formalized MPLP as a distinct way to view processing goals, defines a basic level of access to collections by establishing the

² Elizabeth A. Sudduth, Nancy B. Newins, and William E. Sudduth, *Special Collections in College and University Libraries CLIP Note #35* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2004): 5.

³ Andrew Bruner, “‘New U’ Comparators for Special Collections 2012” Internal Excel Spreadsheet, Reese Library Augusta State University (2012).

minimal necessary intellectual control to ensure discovery of collections, while also maintaining the security of collections. Having a collection's basic preservation needs addressed by a stable macro-environment, rather than conducting labor intensive tasks such as refolding or removing fasteners, articulated an approach that many archives already implemented. Processing collections, whatever their status, is time intensive. Various metrics studies have estimated processing times from 3.3 to 40 hours a linear foot, depending on the type of collection (19th century or modern) and the level of preservation work conducted.⁴

Continuing examination of MPLP has stressed the effective use of available resources to reduce backlog. In the context of academic repositories, student labor is a prime available resource. Small institutions have adopted MPLP to routinely process personal papers, corporate business records, and institutional records. Additionally, in a study cited by Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman, 91% of institutions where staff self-identify as having both processing responsibilities and additional duties have adopted MPLP in processing collections. Christopher J. Prom suggests that Greene and Meissner's data does not support a conclusion that MPLP reduces backlog, and his reanalysis advises additional study to support a correlation between MPLP and backlog. The original Greene and Messiner data in Prom's analysis supports a strong correlation between archives that effectively utilize student labor and size of backlog.⁵ The backlog is least where student labor is utilized the most.

If we accept the premise that more manpower is necessary to process hidden collections, and that support budgets will remain low, where are we most likely to find this extra manpower? In

⁴ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product Less Process: Revamping Traditional Scholarly Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 222-225.

⁵ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Application While Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (2010): 174-226; Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman, "MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?" *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no.2 (2010): 110-13; Christopher J. Prom, "Optimum Access: Processing in College and University Archives," *College and University Archives: Readings in Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009): 155-184.

academic libraries, given Prom's promising correlation, one solution is to increase the number of student assistants available to process collections or to ensure completion of basic departmental tasks. Prom's investigation indicates that increased student help could provide a solution to dealing with an institution's backlog of "hidden collections." An examination of the historical and established uses of student assistants in academic libraries will provide some insight in using students for this type of task.

Literature Review

Student assistants and American academic libraries have a long association. This literature review highlights an over-reliance on library literature rather than literature unique to special collections and archives, largely because archival literature focuses heavily on student internships rather than student assistants. Rather than develop a separate literature, special collections and archives authors instead rely upon the library literature and extrapolate from it where library, archives, and special collections tasks resembled one another.

Student assistants were a fixture in American academic libraries in the 1800s and Academic libraries reported using student assistants to staff their institutions as early as 1853. The personal reminiscence of past leaders in the field bears this out. Harry Lyman Koopman recalls that in 1893 one third of his staff at Brown was composed of student assistants. (To be fair, the whole staff consisted of Brown, an assistant librarian, and a student assistant.) However, Koopman remained enthusiastic about student help and pointed to the 661 students employed at Brown's library by 1930 as proof of the growth in his institution. Initially, Koopman was less choosy about where he used his student assistants, recollecting that they had been responsible for significant reference and circulation work. However, as he discussed the duties of the 1930s student assistant, the work became less autonomous, more clerical in nature and more supervised.⁶

⁶ Gail V. Oltmanns, "The Student Perspective," in *Libraries and Student Assistants: Critical Links*, ed. William K. Black (New York: The Haworth Press, 1995): 63; David A. Baldwin and Daniel C. Barkley, *Supervisors of Student Employees in Today's Academic Libraries* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited,

Few supervisors today could hire students using the criteria advanced by Mildred Camp in *Student Assistants and the College Library*. While acknowledging that some colleagues argued there was no aspect of library work that students could not do with adequate supervision, she believed that students could do routine, mechanical tasks as well as any trained staff person, therefore freeing the trained personnel to focus on more important duties. In fact, any work by students that demanded detailed supervision by staff was deemed poor economy. Additionally, she noted that the hiring pool should be limited to freshmen and sophomores as hiring upperclassmen wasted training and disrupted the library workflow. She discouraged hiring the most academically gifted because their personalities were not suited for painstaking detailed work and they were inclined to show too much initiative. Camp also warned against hiring the popular student; they would attract their friends to the library and this would disrupt the student's work. Yet even Camp agreed that more work could be accomplished with student help than without it.⁷

Charles Harvey Brown and H.G. Bousefield represent a traditional view of student assistants which occasionally persists today. Despite acknowledging that many libraries utilized student assistants to staff circulation and reference desks, they argued that it should be a last resort and a temporary means to deal with staff shortages. Instead, students should ideally be assigned work suitable for untrained workers with no responsibilities with contact with the public. The use of students in public service areas lowered the tone of the library and the dignity of the library profession.⁸

Helen Brown's survey of student assistants, conducted at the libraries of Vassar, Mount Holyoke, and Wellesley, confirmed that the institutions utilized students for the majority of repetitive clerical tasks. She acknowledged that the field debated two viewpoints about student assistants. One viewpoint held that student assistants were in libraries solely to address institutional

2007): 5; Harry Lyman Koopman, "The Student Assistant and Library Training," *Libraries* 35 (1930): 87-89.

⁷ Mildred Camp, "Student Assistants and the College Library," *Library Journal* 59 (1934): 923-925.

⁸ Charles Harvey Brown and H.G. Bousfield, *Circulation Work in College and University Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1933): 53.

needs for efficiency and service; this side held that student duties should consist of the repetitive clerical tasks. The other viewpoint argued that student employment was an educational experience in its own right and they should be given work that complemented their subject of study.⁹ Most practitioners advocated roles which fell between these poles.

Thinking about the role of student assistants, supervisors began to consider what benefits the students gained as library assistants. Lillian Guinn, writing in *Public Libraries*, agreed that students were of benefit to the library, stating “Student help can do satisfactorily much work which would be expensive and unwise to require of a trained library assistant.” She also articulated the less tangible benefits: students were an avenue for the library to be more connected to class work and their presence would make the library more inviting to student use. Additionally, this student pool could provide recruits to the library profession. Students benefited by developing skills in workplace cooperation and learning to fit in to a highly organized work culture.¹⁰

As early as 1932, Mary Elizabeth Downey articulated a major determiner in the ability of student assistants to work effectively in a library setting.

“So far as the attitude of college librarians is concerned our problem naturally resolves itself into two sides: on the one hand are those who do not see how the library can be run without the aid of student assistants and who feel that a greater amount of work can be done satisfactorily with them there so enthusiastic over having students share the work is to say there is nothing which they may not do under careful supervision... on the other hand are college librarians who do not know how to organize and manage such help, who do not have teaching ability, and so strenuously object to being bothered with

⁹ Helen M. Brown, “Conditions Contributing to the Efficient Service of Student Assistants in a Selected Group of College Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries* 5 (1943): 44-52.

¹⁰ Lillian Guinn, “Student Help in the Library,” *Public Libraries* 30 (1925): 162-164.

student assistants. They feel that teaching and supervising the work of students has no part in their work as librarian and that none of it should be delegated to those not having come through a library school... [they] consider everything done in the library as belonging to their own particular province and that it must be the work only of these technically trained and authorized by sheepskin to do it. We are in sympathy with the former attitude.”¹¹

Downey has kindred spirits in the 21st century. Seventy-five years later, Kimberly Burke Sweetman wrote; “[t]here is nothing a well-trained student couldn’t do under careful supervision. Those who do not know how to organize and manage such help [are the ones who] so strenuously object to being bothered with student assistants.”¹²

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a shift in attitude to create assistant positions which challenged students and gave them more responsibility. Providing them with challenging work to perform was believed to be a key to retaining student workers. Students now are seen as team players in the successful academic library. They are consulted about the needs of users, the planning and evaluation of services, can be involved in reference service, circulation service, collection maintenance, clerical support, manuscript processing, bindery/preservation, processing, original cataloging, peer library information teams, and peer library instruction. And yet, even the progressive 1970s produced throwbacks. A student assistant management manual advises, “the primary duty for pages or student assistants is to shelve and shelf-read. Duties may be extended to include answering the telephone, (and renewing books by phone), mending books, preparing magazines for circulation, and desk work.”¹³

¹¹ Mary Elizabeth Downey, “Work of Student Assistants in College Libraries,” *Library Journal* 57 (1932): 417.

¹² Kimberly Burke Sweetman, *Managing Student Assistants: A How to Do It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2007): 1.

¹³ David Gregory, “The Evolving Role of Student Employees in Academic Libraries,” in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 12; Donald J. Kenny and Frances O. Painter, “Recruiting, Hiring and Assessing Student Workers in

While the profession may be comfortable with using student assistants to supplement the work of librarians, tension still exists on using students in two areas: reference services and original cataloging. The debate over the use of student assistants is especially fierce and some practitioners still doubt the effectiveness of utilizing graduate assistants in reference and instruction roles.¹⁴ Given that the bulk of work in special collections falls within reference provision and arrangement and description (cataloging), a deep seated bias against this type of assignment could play into the dearth of literature which exists for student assistants in the archives setting. However, a 1970 case study reported on efforts to expand reference service through the use of student assistants. The hypothesis for this study was that an upper-level college student could perform competent reference work in an undergraduate library staffed by one full-time reference librarian. The librarian would be available for detailed reference questions but students were trained to handle ready reference requests. Having undergone a brief orientation and basic training on locations of materials, catalog entry rules, and search techniques the service seemed effective. Several lines of continuing inquiry were outlined and it was believed there should be further investigation into more effective training.

A significant proportion of the profession, having determined that students assistants were in the library to stay, were more concerned how to effectively select, train, and supervise this sub-section of the workforce. Assuming that 95% of the student body would have some interaction with student assistants,

Academic Libraries,” in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 41; Jeanne F. Voyles and Mark D. Winston, “The Changing Role of the Student Employee in a Team Based Organization,” in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 110; Alice E. Wright, *Library Clerical Workers & Pages (Including Student Assistants)* (Hamden, CT: The Shoestring Press or Linnet Books, 1973): 18.

¹⁴ Karen Womack and Karen Rupp-Serrano, “The Librarian’s Apprentice: Reference Graduate Assistants,” *Reference Services Review* 28 (2000): para. 44; Phillip J. Jones, Janet H. Parsch and Vijith M. Varghese, “Graduate Assistants at the University of Arkansas Libraries: Past, Future and Significance,” *Arkansas Libraries* 62, no.2 (2005): 6-11.

candidate selection was critical.¹⁵ Training, varied duties, and clear instructions were considered an aid to student morale. These factors, along with a careful choice of candidates, would reduce turnover and improve the economic return for unskilled help. The 1980s and 1990s saw an increase in the literature on selection, training, and supervision. A 1985 University of Virginia study made a series of recommendations to address three broad categories of issues: the development of well-articulated hiring processes; a concrete system of rewards and relationships; and an articulated training strategy accompanied by an investment of time to accomplish training goals.¹⁶

Modern manuals expand upon these principles and have value chiefly in the discussion of supervision methods and suggestions for clear and easy to understand documentation forms; Sweetman's work being an excellent illustration of this point.¹⁷ Student management handbooks also elaborate on the position that to improve the training, efficiency, and retention of student assistants, the supervisor must be given training and support in hiring, scheduling, motivating, managing performance, and accommodating the disabled employee. Ultimately, the supervisor who cannot manage student assistants as useful members of the department misses the point of having student assistants at all. "The promise inherent in student workers is not fulfilled if librarians are not available for consultation and other services to faculty, do not serve on substantive campus-wide committees and do not contribute to scholarship and research in the field. [Successful management of student assistants] provides the time librarians need for academic leadership on campus."¹⁸

Assessment on user attitudes to student assistance for reference should be investigated, although this study revealed that

¹⁵ Cecil J. McHale, "An Experiment in Hiring Student Part-time Assistants," *Libraries* 36 (1931): 379-382.

¹⁶ Louis Shores, "Staff Spirit Among Student Assistants," *Libraries* 34 (1929): 346-348; Oltmanns, "The Student Perspective," in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 70.

¹⁷ Kimberly Burke Sweetman, *Managing Student Assistants: A How to Do It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2007): Summary.

¹⁸ Janice H. Burrows, "Training Student Workers in Academic Libraries. How and Why?" in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 77-86.

some students related much easier to help and instruction from their peers. Most surprisingly, the study suggested exploration into practitioner attitudes that all reference service must be conducted by professionals. Some believed that student assistants were capable of answering simple reference questions once they have the time to gain more experience and absorb more knowledge. Using students as effective supplements at the reference desk has been revisited and more attention has been paid to developing formal training that teaches students ready reference resources, OPAC searching techniques, strategies for handling and interpretation of citations, strategies for reference interviews, and the proper methods and techniques for referring questions to more qualified library staff.¹⁹

Besides reference services, literature directly addresses using students for cataloging projects. A microfilm cataloging project, which addressed microfilm that had been omitted in the migration to a Voyager ILS, trained student workers to search for bibliographic records, add these items to the catalog, and create basic catalog records if none were available. Detailed research on using student assistants in cataloging found that they were used for some cataloging tasks such as downloading of bibliographic and authority records, monographic cataloging and classification, assigning subject headings, checking authority controls, doing holdings database maintenance, and editing of 246 or 505 MARC tags.²⁰ This study reflected a continuing reluctance to assign student assistants to higher local cataloging tasks and focused on traditional technical services tasks: processing of materials, applying call number labels, security strips, and property stamps.

¹⁹ Arthur P. Young, "Student Assistants: A Report and a Challenge," *RQ* 9, no. 4 (1970): 295-297; David Gregory, "The Evolving Role of Student Employees in Academic Libraries," in Black, *Libraries and Student Assistants*, 4-28; Chris Neuhaus, "Flexibility and Feedback: A New Approach to Ongoing Training for Reference Student Assistants," *Reference Services Review* 29, no.1 (2001): para. 1.

²⁰ Cecilia M. Schmitz, "Revealing Hidden Collections: The Temporary Cataloging Project at Auburn University Libraries," *Technical Services Quarterly* 19, no.1 (2001): 47-61; Timothy Gatti, "Utilization of Students as Cataloging Assistants at Carnegie Category I Institution Libraries," *Library Resources and Technical Service* 49, no.1 (2005): 27-31.

Students are most often used in a higher level capacity when they provide skill sets that complement rather than duplicate traditional roles. Illustrated in a 1990 study, students performed higher-level cataloging for special projects that need language skills or subject knowledge the library cannot supply. Students were valued for their computer expertise as early as 1987 when students in a Colorado library took the lead on solving the library's signage problems because of their expertise with a Texas Instruments computer and a Hewlett-Packard graph plotter. As library computing services expanded through the 1990s, librarians relied on student assistants to perform tasks that required technical and computer skills with a high degree of accuracy, responsibility, effectiveness, and efficiency. Students assisting in library technology interacted with patrons in the following areas: using library homepage resources, email, Microsoft Office, printing, laptop use, course-based software, online registration, and digital imaging.²¹

Student assistants have also been good conduits to educate the student body in library specific issues like preservation awareness. Using the student assistants as a focus group allowed library personnel to plan strategies to educate the student body on care of materials. Preservation is one area of special collections and archives that made the earliest use of student assistants for department specific tasks. Elaine Smythe created training and workflow to enable student assistants to do preservation work on books. Students have continued to be utilized to undertake specific preservation tasks such as book repair and triage and collection condition surveys.²²

²¹ Joni Gomez and Johanne LaGrange, "A Chinese Challenge: Utilizing Students for Special Cataloging Projects," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 12, no.1 (1990): 39-58; Susan Rewinkel, "Using Student Assistant Resources to Solve a Problem Creatively," *Colorado Libraries* 13 (1987): 25; Constantia Constantinou, "Recruiting, Training and Motivating Student Assistants in Academic Libraries," *Catholic Library World* 69, no.1 (1998): 20-23; Jana Reeg-Steidinger, Denise Madland and Carol Hagness, "Technology Student Assistants in Academic Libraries: We Can't Survive Without 'Em," *Technical Services Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (2005): 65-75.

²² Diane Kaufman and Jeanne M. Drewes, "Using Student Employees to Focus Preservation Awareness Campaigns," *Promoting Preservation Awareness in Libraries: A Sourcebook for Academic, Public School and Special Collections*

Barbara L. Floyd and Richard W. Oram were two of the first to write specifically on the use of undergraduates as archival employees.²³ The majority of supervisors interviewed believed that archives student assistants routinely performed higher-level tasks compared to students in other departments. While a manual was considered useful, because student assistant tasks in archives were rarely routine, supervisors thought that it was more useful to train students in a certain level of basic archival theory. *Student Assistants in Archival Repositories: A Handbook for Managers* (1992) is still a core publication for advice and management strategies but should be read in combination with the more recent Jeannette A. Bastian and Donna Webber's *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors, and Students* (2008). A comparison of both shows the evolution of the goals of archival internships.

Students are considered ideal to participate in many aspects of patron services in special collections and archives: to page and reshelve collections; photocopy material, monitor a reading room, carry out reader registration procedures, and answer simple reference questions.²⁴ These duties are not significantly different from tasks found elsewhere in the library. Mary C. LaFogg contends that students are capable, under supervision, of carrying out department specific tasks.

“Student assistants, usually under direct supervision, assist in the routine aspects of transportation, processing, and servicing of unique and confidential archival materials and other activities supporting the public, technical and administrative services functions of the department.

ed. Jeanne M. Drewes and Julie A. Page (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1997): 124; Elaine Smythe, “Preservation on a Shoestring or What to Do Until the Conservator Comes,” *LLA Bulletin* (Winter 1993): 124-128; Mary Ellen Starmer, “Benefits of Practicum Students in Preservation: The Value of the Experience to the Department, Students and Field,” *Collection Management* 29, no. 2 (2005): 33-40.

²³ Barbara L. Floyd and Richard W. Oram, “Learning by Doing: Undergraduates as Employees in Archives,” *American Archivist* 55, no. 3 (1992): 444.

²⁴ Mary C. LaFogg, et al., *Student Assistants in Archival Repositories: A Handbook for Managers* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992): 31.

Student assistant tasks include the following: prepare and verify inventories against physical contents of collections, refolder, rebox and label material, stamp and/or number folders, arrange material in alphabetical, chronological or other order in accordance with a pre-determined plan of arrangement, do routine preservation work including: identifying and photocopying unstable materials, removing paper clips, staples, rubber bands and other damaging materials, type or input finding aids, inventories correspondence acknowledgements bibliographic records and other work in accordance with established formats and standards, retrieve and shelf collection material from adjacent and off – site storage areas, photocopy material for patrons for administrative purposes and collection preservation, do record keeping, invoicing, filing and data entry for files needed for administrative management, reference use, move, shelve and pack collection supplies and furniture, record requests from institution offices, make recommendations for arrangements and descriptions, take subject content notes for materials being processed, trace corporate or individual names and histories, and prepare cross references as directed by a supervisor.²⁵

LaFogg advised managers who train students to rely on SAA's *Archival Fundamental Series*, which provides introductory through advanced how-to information and practical examples. LaFogg further advised consulting current professional literature to furnish background for tasks assigned to students.²⁶

LaFogg, already aware of the backlog crisis, advocated the use of student assistants to alleviate it. "If there is a backlog because past resources have not kept pace with the actual rate of acquisitions and demands for services, this indicates how

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

important it is to control this situation before it worsens or services are curtailed.”²⁷ M. Winslow Lundy explained how the University of Colorado Boulder utilized students to provide minimum level cataloging to address the backlog for two rare book collections. Methods developed by libraries to handle the backlog in new acquisitions for general circulation have rarely been applied to items in special collections, particularly if these departments were responsible for aspects of acquisitions or cataloging.²⁸ Adapting the current process for temporary records to special collections holdings reduced the backlog, but this project was confined to monograph collections which additionally had available records in OCLC which the student could modify and copy.

The Center for Primary Research and Training at the University of California Los Angeles has standardized a process that pairs students’ research needs with unprocessed or underprocessed collections, targeting both potential scholarship and the backlog of hidden collections. As described by Victoria Steele, an archivist trains students on arrangement and description techniques, often following more traditional processing guidelines rather than MPLP, resulting in high-quality finding aids.²⁹

However, LaFogg, Lundy, and Steele utilized graduate student assistants similarly to the archives internships outlined in *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors and Students*. This guide stressed that archives supervisors must work closely with faculty advisors to provide a strong internship experience for students.³⁰ Relying on student internships is an option for institutions having library or archives schools or graduate degrees related to a collection’s strengths. Smaller repositories wishing to make use of undergraduates must extrapolate their goals and processes from the literature on library student assistants, such as the LaFogg and Bastian and Webber

²⁷ Ibid., 1.

²⁸ M. Winslow Lundy, “Providing Access to Special Collections with In-process Records,” *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 45, no.1 (2007): 39-58.

²⁹ Victoria Steele, “Exposing Hidden Collections: The UCLA Experience,” *C&RL News* 69 (June 2008): 316-317, 331.

³⁰ Jeannette Allis, Bastian, and Donna. Webber, *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors, and Students* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008): 20.

publications as well as Larry M. Brow's article that condenses archival processing down to three concise points for student training. Brow advises encouraging students to embrace their role as subject experts when processing collections, to be careful not to destroy any information about the papers being processed and to avoid the "toxic trap" of wondering if the collection will ever be of interest to anyone in particular.³¹

Modern literature on student assistants shows that libraries are encouraged to view students as a valuable asset, rather than a necessary curse or an answer to cheap if unreliable labor. Supervisors who view students as library ambassadors and beneficial resources do the most to ensure that students are trained to be valuable colleagues in providing good service. More emphasis is being placed on good training, clear directions, and multiple delivery methods of training to grow and nurture superior student assistants.³² Documenting procedures can decrease training time and increase student efficiency.³³ Rather than assigning tasks that any student can accomplish, supervisors are now encouraged to assign tasks based on individual strengths and inclinations.

Attitudes on the capabilities of student assistants have changed over time and students are often seen as capable of accomplishing significant work within departments rather than solely as labor for repetitive tasks, though this attitude still exists. Students are particularly in demand to support libraries' technology needs or to enhance special programs. Adequate training and supervisor attitudes are the most important factors in developing quality student assistants and these factors also limit student turnover. Special collections and archives could use student assistants for a variety of tasks related to processing hidden collections, provided the procedures developed for graduate

³¹ Larry M. Brow, "'The Spiel' aka Processing Advice for Student Assistants," *Archival Outlook* no. 3 (April/May 2012): 26.

³² Jane M. Kathman and Michael D. Kathman, "Training Student Employees for Quality Service," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 26, no. 3 (2000): 176-182; John Phil McLaney, Lisa E. Vardaman and Brian D. Webb, "Training Students Workers: A Survey of Alabama Libraries," *Alabama Librarian* 54, no. 1 (2004): 15-16.

³³ Gwen Meyer Gregory, *The Successful Academic Librarian: Winning Strategies from Library Leaders* (Medford, New Jersey: Information Today Inc., 2005): 5.

students can be applied to an undergraduate candidate pool. The literature gives no strong indication that undergraduate students cannot be used as supplemental labor.

There are two very important points to remember when considering hidden collections in general and especially in using student assistants to help deal with them. The goals for the collections must be clear. “Defining what constitutes access to hidden collections is crucial. Access in this case refers to a better understanding of the delicate balance between minimal intellectual control that enables use and minimal control that adds no value to researchers wanting to use collections.”³⁴ Without this, student help will be wasted. Archives and library cultural norms must also be overcome to utilize students to their fullest potential.

Survey

A small scale survey was conducted to see what sort of tasks student assistants were performing in special collections and archives and what practitioners believed about using student assistants in their special collections and archives. The method used was the personal interview in order to examine opinions, facts, and stories from supervisors in order to benefit from their experiences and to formulate other possible avenues of inquiry when using student assistants to accomplish the work of academic special collection and archives.³⁵

Out of several interviewing formats, I chose the semi-structured interview format in order to maintain interview flexibility. This type of interview allows for follow-up questions while retaining a schedule to cover the desired aspects of the topic. An interview schedule can consist of an outline that groups the topics to be covered or can consist of open-ended questions posed to the interviewee in either a fixed or varied order.³⁶ See the appendix for a copy of the interview schedule.

³⁴ Elizabeth Yakel, “Hidden Collections in Archives and Libraries,” *OCLC Systems and Services* 21, no. 2 (2005): 96.

³⁵ Sabine Mertens Oishi, *How to Conduct In-Person Interviews for Surveys* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2003): 173.

³⁶ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 113; G. E. Gorman, and Peter Clayton, *Qualitative*

Interviewees were chosen by using two criteria. First, the interviewee was employed by a University System of Georgia (USG) library. By having all subjects employed by the USG, it would control for the policies and funding mechanisms influencing the hiring and use of student assistants because all respondents would be constrained by similar restrictions enacted by the Board of Regents. Second, participants who met the USG qualification were chosen from the Society of Georgia Archivists (SGA) membership list because members tend to be supportive of research questions affecting the profession. Of 200 SGA members, 34 were affiliated with USG institutions. From this number, seven individuals agreed to be interviewed resulting in a return of 20% of the sampled population. While interviewee selection was more a result of purposive sampling, a case could also be made for convenience sampling because of access to the SGA membership list.³⁷ However, I did invite SGA members to participate in the interviews who were not known personally to the interviewer in order to mitigate bias that could be introduced by convenience sampling. The likely reasons for the small sample size include the compressed timeline available for the research project and the interview period falling during the summer months when many individuals take vacation time.

The small sample size dictated that I could not use any of the subjects as pre-test subjects for the interview schedule. The interview schedule was pre-tested on a colleague that did not fit the criteria for the interviewees. Interviewees were contacted by email. The email outlined the purpose of the interview and individuals were asked to reply with a preferred date and time for an interview if they wished to participate. A follow up email was sent with instructions on how to participate. A Wimba interview room was set up to have archived recordings that I could listen to later to supplement and verify notes taken. Due to the brief timeline, the interviews were not transcribed. The interview archive was destroyed at the end of the project to protect interviewee confidentiality. This combination telephone/internet method was

Research for the Information Professional (London: Facet Publishing, 2005): 128.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 129.

chosen in order to accurately recall the substance of the interviews, and to eliminate any bias which could be introduced by the body language of the interviewer as well as a concession to the short timeline and the distance between the researcher and the interviewees. However, a telephone interview takes some control away from the interviewer. "In comparison with the personal interview the person being interviewed over the telephone tends to find it easier to terminate the interview before it is finished."³⁸

Findings

The population interviewed ranged from mid-level managers and directors of departments to a director of libraries and archives. These individuals served institutions having from 6,000 to 35,000 students. Several of the special collections were offshoots of other departments, such as Access Services or a subdivision of access and reference. Most were library departments in their own right and one was a division of a combined cultural heritage organization that included a gallery, museum, and Holocaust interpretive center.

One department had no student assistants, but was expecting to have access to five student research assistants as part of a grant funded project. One department had decided not to hire student assistants and to divert that funding to hiring a full-time paraprofessional. Two departments had one student assistant, one department had two assigned and funded student assistants, and one department had four to five student assistants.

Two departments engaged in more traditional archival processing because they had small collections; one of these said that they had eliminated their backlog. The remaining departments believed that their methods more closely aligned with MPLP. Most thought that the use of MPLP was a necessity and one department stated that MPLP had helped make a considerable dent in their backlog. However, most of the MPLP practitioners said that the collection being processed would be the greatest determinant of whether or not to use an MPLP approach. One practitioner said

³⁸ Ronald L. Powell and Lynn Silipigni Connaway, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians* 4th ed. (Westport CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004): 157.

that as a lone arranger, they had no choice but to employ an MPLP approach.

Respondents varied in the tasks they felt could be assigned to students and each respondent labeled different tasks as low-level or high-level. One respondent stated that all of the tasks would be assigned to students, depending on the collection and the strengths of each individual student. Most respondents believed that most of the tasks were low-level, but acknowledged that the collection itself would determine whether a task would be low-level or high-level. One respondent said that a third level needed to be created, the “it depends” to assess how tasks would change importance dependent upon the collection. Other tasks or projects mentioned by the interviewees that could be assigned to student assistants included:

- Constructing displays – both creating display content and mounting displays
- Functioning as a “teacher’s aide” during archives instruction sessions
- Answering the telephone and taking messages
- Functioning as exhibit docents
- Setting up facilities for special events
- Hosting refreshment tables for special events
- Gathering data for grant applications
- Choosing storage materials for realia
- Compiling supplies orders with supervisor approval
- Creating collections from “mystery box donations”
- Designing webpages
- Training other student assistants
- Creating signs
- Updating brochures and other publications

A number of methods are used to recruit student assistants: keeping an informal list of students who inquire about positions; using referrals from academic departments or other student assistants; recruiting from access services; choosing from a pool of student volunteers; or observing likely students during class sessions requested by academic departments as part of course

content. One department specifically sets the requirements that student assistants must be history majors with a 3.0 or better grade point average in their coursework. Graduate students who work in the department must be masters' candidates in either history or library science.

The training of student assistants varied as well. In some cases, student training was very informal and consisted of personal instruction and task shadowing. Student training manuals were used by other departments and one respondent mentioned that collections care was specifically addressed. Another department developed a training process that all student volunteers and interns must undertake. Students were given vocabulary sheets of terms and a quiz to acquaint students with archival "buzz words," exercises on space management and environmental standards, readings on basic archival processes, and an assignment to visit another archives to observe the similarities and differences in their operations. Additional skills were taught in group sessions with the supervisor demonstrating and performing the task with the students. Another program provided two student training manuals: one that addressed basic archival processes and another that addressed database imputing. Students were also required to read on the history of the university, attend the volunteer orientation to learn basic tasks, perform task shadowing, and ask a lot of questions. In reviewing the interviews, it was clear that the respondents who believed that students were capable of valuable work to the department and were the most enthusiastic about their inclusion had also spent the most effort to develop training programs for their students and spent time supervising student assistants in the acquisition of new skills.

Attitudes towards student assistants ran the full gamut of positions uncovered in the literature review. One department had decided to cease using student assistants because there was not enough employee continuity, the work outcomes were too varied, and they preferred to invest in a paraprofessional who was motivated to invest time and continuing education in the position. However, most believed that the students did the work to adequate or professional levels, allowed the department to accomplish more work, and brought enthusiasm and fresh eyes to the work. One department acknowledged the necessity of accepting a lack of

worker continuity because eventually students would graduate. Others thought that there was very little turnover in student employees, that the students appreciated the benefits of a campus job, and, more importantly, were drawn to the library or department because of a positive work atmosphere. One respondent conveyed that mentoring and helping students have work experience that added to their resumes or graduate school applications was an obligation to the profession.

Recommendations for further study

The findings indicate that a new interview schedule should be developed to focus on tasks specific to special collections and archives. The task list – influenced heavily by the library environment – revealed no consensus among the interviewees when asked to assess the effectiveness of student assistants in a special collections and archives environment. Designating tasks as low-level or high-level, as suggested by the results of the literature review, did not help clarify what were appropriate assignments for student assistants. As the literature review demonstrated, questions about student assistants need to be answered with archives specific solutions rather than using solutions extrapolated from a similar but still different environment.

A first step for further study will be to develop a new list of tasks which can be assigned to student assistants; a list which focuses on tasks done in archives. The training manuals provided to student employees of special collections and archives should be reviewed to discover what tasks are commonly assigned to student assistants. This study should then be repeated using a new task list, preferably on a larger population of respondents.

Conclusion

It is not unreasonable to consider the use of student assistants for tasks in special collections and archives; the literature review shows that student assistants have been part of American academic libraries for well over a century. Further, student assistants are employed in a representative sample of the USG special collections and archives and the majority of those institutions included in this sample identify with MPLP as a management standard. There is an indication that institutions most

satisfied with their student assistants employ a well-thought training process, which is necessary to achieve results. Institutions wishing to implement MPLP as their management philosophy to deal with collections backlog will not be deviating from accepted practice if they consider using student assistants to fill their labor deficit. However studying the use of students specifically in the special collections and archives environments would provide a more solid body of evidence on which to assess their effectiveness.

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Appendix

Interview schedule

Interviewee #

Date

Title or responsibilities

1. Tell me a little about your institution.
2. Tell me a little about your collections or department.
3. Number of students in department.
4. Does your department have a traditional processing philosophy or one aligned more closely with MPLP?
5. Of the following tasks, which ones do you routinely assign to students? (blank means no check means yes)
 - a. prepare and verify inventories against physical contents of collections
 - b. refolder, rebox and label material
 - c. stamp and/or number folders,
 - d. arrange material in alphabetical, chronological or other order in accordance with a pre – determined plan of arrangement,
 - e. do routine preservation work including: identifying and photocopying unstable materials,
 - f. removing paper clips, staples, rubber bands and other damaging materials,
 - g. type or input finding aids, inventories correspondence acknowledgements bibliographic records and other work in accordance with established formats and standards,
 - h. retrieve and shelf collection material from adjacent and off – site storage areas,
 - i. photocopy material for patrons for administrative purposes and collection preservation
 - j. do record keeping, invoicing, filing and data entry for files needed for administrative management,
 - k. reference
 - l. move, shelve and pack collection supplies and furniture,
 - m. record requests from institution offices (m proved difficult to explain and was struck after two interviews)

- n. make recommendations for arrangements and descriptions,
 - o. take subject content notes for materials being processed,
 - p. trace corporate or individual names and histories, and prepare cross references as directed by a supervisor
6. Which of these tasks do you consider lower level tasks in terms of the student's ability and capability to assume responsibility? (Place "L" by task)
 7. Which of these tasks do you consider lower level tasks in terms of the student's ability and capability to assume responsibility? (Place "H" by task)
 8. What other tasks do you assign that have not been mentioned?
 9. How do you recruit student assistants?
 10. How do you train student assistants?
 11. How do you feel about using student assistants in archives or special collections?
 12. What else would you like to address on the subject of student assistants?