
Student Assistants are used in all departments of the library, but very little is directly written about the management of students in university archives and special collections. By reviewing the available literature and presenting the results of several interviews with archival professionals, this paper intends to explain the current approach to internships and archival education; the attitude of supervisors to their student assistants; the available funding options; the ways in which job descriptions are written and positions are publicized; the hiring process; the orientation and training of the new workers; the tasks the assistants are assigned; and the system of motivation, evaluation, and rewards. For each of these topics, the paper explores the differences that exist between the work of graduates and undergraduates and the areas in which the literature and reality do or do not coincide.

Headings:

Archives -- Administration

Archivists -- Education

Student Assistants -- College and University Archives
UTILIZING STUDENT LIBRARY ASSISTANTS IN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

by
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# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................. 4

Literature Review ........................................................... 6

Methodology ................................................................. 29

Results ................................................................. 32

Conclusion ................................................................. 52

Works Cited ................................................................. 56

Appendix A: Letter of Interest ............................................. 60

Appendix B: Interview Questions ......................................... 62
Introduction

The last twenty years have seen a boom in literature regarding student assistants in reference, circulation, and even computer labs, but very little directly related to archives and special collections. Archives and special collections do not tend to be the most high-profile of a university library’s departments. Unless a student is specifically instructed to use its primary resources or stumbles upon a citation in the online catalog, they are not likely to know what it is or what its staff does.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an “archive” as “1. A place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept” or “2. A historical record or document so preserved.”¹ Subsequently, it describes an “archivist” as “A keeper of archives.”² But what does it mean to “keep” archives? It is useful to think of a university archives and special collections department as a “microcosm” of the total functions of the library.³ The archive develops collections by soliciting individuals or groups for their papers; it sets up disposition schedules with other university departments to transfer papers in a records management scheme; it acquires materials through donation or purchase; it processes new materials and catalogs them according to accepted standards. The department has its own reference staff to facilitate use of the collections, educational programs and exhibits to introduce individuals to the holdings, and digital initiatives to

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broaden access to the unique collections. Traditionally, the largest percentage of the department’s (and generally the student assistant’s) time is taken up with processing the new additions, but supporting digital projects, such as scanning photographs, has also become a priority in many special collections departments.

In order to fully explain the process of working with student assistants in the university archives and special collections, the paper has been broken down into several categories: Practicums, Interns, and Archival Education; Attitude; Funding Options; Publicizing Work and Job Descriptions; Hiring Process; Orientation and Training; Tasks and Supervision; and Motivation, Rewards, and Evaluation. These categories are introduced in the literature review and revisited in the results section as the fundamental organizing scheme of the investigation.

Using the available literature and interviews of current archival professionals, this paper presents insight into the way managers both conceptualize the positions of student assistants and how they are actually used. There have been several interrelated guiding questions in this research. What are students in archives doing and is this situation in any way different from that being presented in the more generalized library literature? Have changes in their range of duties and levels of responsibility been a help or a hindrance to the work being done in archives? Do the literature and the professionals share opinions on the best ways to manage this contingent of their workforce or does reconciling the needs of the department and the needs of the students remain a difficult issue?
Literature Review

Introduction

In 1990, Richard J. Cox observed that the archival profession was failing to connect with students, particularly undergraduates:

Although there appears to be a lack of sufficiently qualified candidates for archival positions at entry, intermediate, and upper level positions, there are now no formal efforts to attract undergraduate students to consider careers in archival administration. Individuals generally learn about archival careers at the graduate level and then only by happenstance. This problem is further compounded by a continuing weak public image of the archival profession. Archivists, led by their associations like SAA and NAGARA, need initiatives that communicate to undergraduate students – in all fields – the nature, opportunities, and importance of archival careers.4

One of the ways that these undergraduates learn about archival careers is through work experience. Although the growing visibility of the field is attracting more students who begin an advanced degree in library science or history with the intention of becoming archivists, others find the field surreptitiously through employment as student assistants. Not all students who end up working in archives see their jobs as long-term careers. But even a student who thinks of his position more as a part-time job than professional development can make a useful contribution if utilized properly.

With tighter budgets and growing responsibilities, archives, despite their potential reservations, are increasingly using student assistants to augment their permanent staff.

Although much has been written about student assistants in other library departments (especially circulation, reference, and the computer labs), there has been very little written on the use of student assistants in archives and special collections. Using the available literature about other library student assistants, para-professional staff, archival practices, and archival and library education, this paper will provide an overview of the development of current practices and strategies in educating, hiring, training, and utilizing this growing labor source.

**Practicums, Interns, and Archival Education**

Archival education has undergone several different paradigm shifts. In-service training remained nearly the only avenue towards an archival career until the 1970s. During this time, formal graduate education in a library science or a history program became increasingly encouraged for professional success. A text from 1993 describes the typical archival education program as:

[A] one-course introduction to the archives, mostly offered by adjunct professors who are practicing archivists outside the universities where they teach. These courses typically touch on appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation, and reference services and have only enough time to provide a grounding in these fundamentals . . . Education poses a dilemma: the profession wishes to maintain an independent approach to training, yet that training must be based in history, library, or other departments because the profession is too small to support its own separate departments.

In his study of the development of the archival profession, Cox quotes Ruth Helmuth’s 1981 article in *American Archivist* arguing, “theory is essential, but without the practicum

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it will not an archivist make . . . only in the practicum can students build confidence in applying those theories to the slippery realities of life.”

Frederick J. Stielow, in his article on the changes in archival education, makes the observation, “[T]he archival educator must acknowledge a basic dilemma. One does not become an archivist by ingesting classroom knowledge alone. Just as doctors become doctors by practicing medicine, historians by conducting research and writing, lawyers by standing before the bar – archivists become archivists by actually working in archives.”

Cox also reminds the reader that the practicum has received criticism from educators and professionals who claim that it “has extremely limited value, gives the impression that archival work is more craft than profession, minimizes the importance of theory in archival administration, and has not been carefully monitored or regulated.”

Similarly, there has been little critical evaluation of student practicums. A major factor in ensuring the success of practicums has been to convince the host institution that it will also benefit from the work of interns. The student performs valuable tasks and can also provide a fresh perspective with “the viewpoint of a disinterested outsider.”

Texts for the managers accepting these interns reminds them that “free student labor” should be accepted with the understanding that “volunteer efforts should serve only to supplement paid students because volunteers can create major difficulties for supervision and regulation that do not occur with paid staff. Should volunteers come forward, they are

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7 Cox, *Analysis*, 126.
8 Stielow, 2-3.
10 Cox, *Analysis*, 139.
best utilized for special projects that would not otherwise be done, rather than for basic
work of the archival program.”

This useful application of interns should provide the “general introduction to
processing” suggested by the Society of American Archivists (SAA), or it does not
provide a sufficiently full educational experience. When Cox revisited the topic in
2000, he acknowledged that the opportunities for formal education had expanded; there
are more coursework options and full-time faculty, but 55.3% of SAA-recognized
programs consist of three courses or less and also require a practicum. Cox, an archival
professor himself, articulates his mixed feelings on the practicum. He warns, “If students
can be placed in a practicum where they not only experience records work but are able to
develop skills in critically analyzing what happens in the typical archives or records
management program, then the practicum has a future. But if the practicum is little more
than a means for students to build a resume or to supply inexpensive labor, then I doubt if
the practicum is worth much attention or that it possesses much of a future; it is only a
historic milestone in the development of education for records professionals.”

**Attitude**

One frequently discussed issue is the attitude taken toward student assistants.
These workers are often the victims of negative stereotypes. In her article, “Student
Assistants in Academic Libraries: From Reluctance to Reliance,” Emilie C. White

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14 Richard J. Cox, *Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records
discusses the historical progression of this attitude. The literature from the early 20th century often describes the use of student assistants as begrudgingly necessary and not especially desirable. Although White does present a small portion of literature with a more progressive attitude, this does not become common until the 1970s. During this decade, the duties and responsibilities of student assistants increased rapidly. Although most of the literature from the past thirty years continues this constructive approach to dealing with student assistants and solutions over critiques, several article titles can highlight the up-hill battle for a positive image: “Herding Cats: Training Student Assistants in Customer Service, Assisting Faculty, and Facilitating Trainers for Various Technical Levels;”17 “Bridging the Service Gap with Student Employees: Curse or Blessing?,”18 and “Student Employees: Threat or Menace?.”19 In an article from Bella Karr Gerlich, Head of Arts and Special Collections at the University Libraries at Carnegie Mellon University, she explains how she became so frustrated that her student workforce “performed with mediocrity at best and had poor attendance records and ambivalent attitudes toward their work” that she decided to spend the salary allocation for student workers to instead hire a small number of full-time staff and only retain students for night or weekend work.20 Gerlich describes the costs of student labor as “poor

20 Bella Karr Gerlich, “Rethinking the Contributions of Student Employees to Library Services,” Library Administration & Management 16, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 146, 149.
productivity . . . minimal return on training investment . . . hampering teamwork . . . [and] security and safety risks.”

Her ultimate conclusion is:

Academic libraries will always employ student assistants in some capacity. However, until our organizations challenge the skills and knowledge of the Net Generation, we should stop using our professional engines to force a square peg into a round hole – again and again and again. Let’s do as Burrows suggests and spend our money more wisely on hiring a smaller, more dedicated workforce that will help us realize our goals instead of hindering our progress as librarians.

A less serious, but just as telling, article on dissatisfaction with student employees appears in the “On the Lighter Side” column of a 1999 issue of College & Undergraduate Libraries. The short story “Webster, Schmebster” recounts one manager’s ongoing frustrations with his incompetent staff. A broad humor piece, it is an exaggeration, but the students that populate it are unmotivated, unproductive, and have bizarre personality quirks.

Many more of the modern writers on the topic of student assistants follow the advice of Mark B. Johnson who implores that although their first priority may be school, “it is important to neither consider, nor treat students in one’s employ as anything less than a valued, contributing member of the staff.” The 1994 version of CLIP Note (#20): Managing Student Employees in College Libraries, confirms that since the 1986

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21 Gerlich, 148.
22 Gerlich, p. 150.
version of this manual, the interest in and appreciation of student assistants has grown considerably.\textsuperscript{25}

**Funding Options**

One of the most obvious distinctions between graduate and undergraduate archives assistants is their form and rate of pay. Since student assistants are most often hired as a “low cost” alternative to additional permanent staff, how much of a financial savings is this and where does the money come from? The vast majority of undergraduates are supported by the Federal Work-Study Program. According to the government’s official Web site, the Federal Work-Study Program “provides jobs for undergraduate and graduate students with financial need, allowing them to earn money to help pay education expenses. The program encourages community service work and work related to each student’s course of study.”\textsuperscript{26} Depending on institutional policy, these students can often be had with little or no direct funding from the archives department. As the official guide explains, “[it] depends on when you apply, your level of need, and the funding level of your school.”\textsuperscript{27} As a part of their financial aid package, students are allotted a fixed number of hours they can work at a regulated scale of pay which starts at the federal minimum wage and can be higher if specialized skills are required for the position; there is no “maximum” rate of pay. Additionally, a student must be enrolled at least half-time during the regular school year or for at least three

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\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
credit hours during the summer to be eligible for these funds.\textsuperscript{28} These jobs exist everywhere from the dining hall to the computing center, but the library is often a popular option. If federal funds are not available, the archives may be able to reallocate lapsed salary money from open professional positions to hire temporary student workers.\textsuperscript{29} Some of the literature indicates a potential lack of interest in studying hiring practices for student labor because the growth of the Federal Work-Study Program often forced libraries to hire students with these external funds, rather than those who were more qualified.\textsuperscript{30} Graduate student funding can be a permanent part of an archive’s budget or it can be made possible by assistantships funded entirely or in part by the student’s home department.\textsuperscript{31} Guidelines for graduate student wages or assistantships vary among institutions.

**Publicizing Work and Job Descriptions**

The first step toward hiring student workers is to publicize the opening, most likely through a carefully crafted job description. One of the available guides for the management of student assistants insists that “[a] well-written job description of each student employee’s job is a must. For you, it provides the context for the training, supervision, and evaluation of your employee. For the student employee, it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28}David A. Baldwin, *Supervision of Student Employees in Academic Libraries* (Englewood (CO): Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1991), 86.
\item \textsuperscript{29}Maher, 247.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Maher, 248.
\end{itemize}
communicates clearly the basic duties and expectations of the job." The guide also provides a list of components necessary for an effective listing:

- The components of the job
- Skills and knowledge required
- Skills and knowledge desirable
- Work schedule requirements (if any)
- An idea of workloads to be accomplished within specific time frames (if any)

Accuracy, clarity, and brevity are the guiding principles most often mentioned in the construction of these advertisements. Other specific suggestions include avoiding jargon, describing the department of the library which manages the position, and explaining the way that the position is administratively situated within the department.

Producing a well-constructed job description is futile if it is not made available to a large pool of potential applicants. Many libraries have regulated systems for publishing job ads through their own personnel departments or through the university itself. The university’s financial aid office will also have a set procedure for making job descriptions available to those qualified for federal work study or for other students needing additional income. Less formal procedures can be equally as effective, such as posting fliers or sending messages to academic departments and faculty members. Positive word of mouth is also common “where the student worker has had an especially positive work experience.”

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33 Kathman, PLUS, 9.
34 Baldwin, 48.
**Hiring Process**

With the growing number and the enhanced responsibilities of student assistants, libraries are beginning to critically examine their hiring procedures. The Federal Work-Study Program has made many employers feel overly constricted in their hiring options. The librarians from one South Carolina college explained that in their institution, student assistants are actually assigned to the library by a campus-wide personnel office. Another author was similarly concerned that without good clear relations with the personnel office, its staff “may feel that the library is a good place to put student workers who are unwanted elsewhere . . . a dumping ground for unqualified students.”

They further elaborate, “When students do not perform in an acceptable manner, we have the option of firing them, but we may not be able to replace them. This forces us to retain students whose performances are marginal.” In “Making Federal Work-Study Work,” Sherry E. Young describes the problem: “Departments may hire unqualified or poorly motivated individuals for work-study positions in the event that no qualified applicant applies. When supervisors select underqualified students for jobs that require immediate and specific skills, those students will likely fail to successfully perform their jobs.”

Young argues that although employers may be concerned about losing candidates by lengthening the hiring process or entering into a conflict with the office that handles financial aid, they ought to perform a thorough examination of all potential hires: requiring them to fill out application forms, conducting personal interviews, and checking

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37 Lois Walker and Ann Fliotsos, “Student Assistants and Their Expectations,” *The Southeastern Librarian* 42 (Fall 1992), 69.

references. This will lead to more qualified employees, more satisfied supervisors, and ultimately benefit the library. 39

The literature concerning student assistants in computer labs regularly emphasizes this selective approach and indicates a more flexible environment where students are hired based on merit rather than on work-study funding. While this literature is a good source of ideas for the structure of a student assistant program, it must be remembered that these computer positions often have a larger allocation of salary funds and the ability to hire outside of the work-study pool. In this way, it may be more applicable to the hiring of graduate student assistants than work-study bound undergraduates. Claire C. Lassalle and Robyn C. Richard’s article “How to Recruit, Motivate and Retain Effective Student Workers?” suggests that the four steps of the hiring process be resumes, telephone interviews, personal interviews, and an on-site working visit. 40 Technical skills and experience are even more highly valued in this environment, but Lassalle and Richard explain that “[it] is important to find student workers who are motivated, dedicated, respectful, and mature. These qualities cannot be readily taught to a young adult . . . If the student worker possesses these qualities and has a desire to learn, they will succeed and become an effective [ ] staff member.” 41 Due to the nature of the work, it is even less likely that the archives department will find individuals who have experience in this field, but the SAA manual Student Assistants in Archival Repositories

39 Young, 490-492.
41 Lassalle and Richard, 91.
suggests that similar enough experience can come from “clerical work and records
management, public service work, and library work.”

The personal interview is one of the most effective ways to judge whether a
student, particularly a first-year student with minimal work experience, possesses all of
the difficult-to-teach characteristics outlined above. It gives the employer an opportunity
to both assess the student’s potential and carefully explain “the precise duties and
responsibilities of the position, the evaluation and reappointment process, salary and
benefits, work schedule, dress code, and public service etiquette.” It also gives students
an opportunity to ask questions about the position and observe their working conditions.

While all of the literature advocates candor about job responsibilities, the SAA manual is
particularly clear that the hiring supervisor should not “glamorize the position” and
should solicit reactions to potential situations, such as dealing with “an irate faculty
patron [or] boxing records in a dirty, hot basement.” When several employees have
interviewed well, it is encouraged that the interviewing supervisor check students’
references, asking, if applicable, questions about “past employment, including duration,
absences, punctuality, skills, and reasons for leaving previous positions.” The interview
has the indirect benefit of implying that “the student is an important resource to you.
This decreases notions of peripherality at the outset.” This is especially important with
the increasing popularity of team-based approaches to library work and the comparatively
small staffs of archives departments.

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43 Constantina Constantinou, “Recruiting, Training and Motivating Student Assistants in
44 SAA, p. 13.
45 Baldwin, p. 73.
46 Michael D. Kathman and Jane McGurn Kathman, “Integrating Student Employees into the
Another desirable characteristic is potential longevity. In “Developing and Implementing a Comprehensive Training and Incentive Program for Student Employees in Information,” Jim Osborn explains:

> We also hire with an eye to the future. We look for younger students or those who will be at our school for more than one year. Incoming grad students and freshmen are good candidates. If you hire one of these people, you can train them and have them on staff for several years, rather than the one year you’d have when hiring a senior. Also be on the lookout for people you think might have potential for positions of higher responsibility and authority... Think long term.\(^{47}\)

The work-study situation can also impact a library’s ability to maintain staff, as “[m]ost work-study money is awarded to freshmen, with awards decreasing when the student becomes an upperclassman. The result is that we lose experienced workers who do not receive work-study rewards.”\(^{48}\) The amount of time a student can work in a given semester is also a significant factor in hiring. The archive often has truncated hours compared with the rest of the library. As such, it needs students who are available during the day and possibly on some weekends. The computer lab student assistant literature emphasizes that workers should come from a wide variety of disciplines both because enthusiasm is more important than experience, and because it will likely reduce the number of potential scheduling conflicts as students will have different classes and other obligations to work around.\(^{49}\) Again, the hiring of graduate level assistants may differ, as those schools that have graduate programs training students in library science or archival administration will have a natural interest in hiring those directly interested and often


\(^{48}\) Walker and Fliotsos, 69.

\(^{49}\) Johnson, 378.
skilled individuals. Employers are also encouraged to consider students who may not be in the top of their class in scholastic achievement, but also to keep in mind that a student who is having difficulty in school may not have as much time to dedicate to a job.\textsuperscript{50}

**Orientation and Training**

Once student assistants are hired, they must be fully oriented to their role in the new work environment. This orientation may be formal or informal and varies in scope from one institution to another. Morell D. Boone, Sandra G. Yee, and Rita Bullard’s manual *Training Student Library Assistants* explains the benefits of gathering this group together for a large general orientation:

In a lecture format or with slides and video, students can be given an introduction to the entire organization of the building (or several buildings). They can be oriented to the “big picture” of the service organization, introduced to staff members, and can get a general idea of what happens in each of the departments within the organization in addition to the one to which they have been assigned. The general get-together helps student employees meet one another and gives impetus to the team building effort.\textsuperscript{51}

The orientation can be a good initial morale builder and it can also accomplish specific tasks, such as familiarizing student assistants with time-card procedures, paycheck distribution, dress codes, emergency procedures, etc. It is suggested that this information be complied into a student handbook and distributed for future reference.\textsuperscript{52} This both “reduces the anxiety associated with a new job” and allows the student’s immediate supervisor to focus on more individualized training issues.\textsuperscript{53} Many libraries do not

\textsuperscript{50} Malmquist, 305.
\textsuperscript{51} Boone 90.
\textsuperscript{52} Jane M. Kathman and Michael D. Kathman, “Training Student Employees for Quality Service,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 26, no. 3 (May 2000), 179.
\textsuperscript{53} Baldwin, 91.
provide such a general orientation and expect that all general information will be provided by the supervisor in the departmental orientation, which leads to inevitable inconsistencies.

Ideally, the departmental orientation will follow the general orientation and the supervisor will be able to convey information on “departmental goals, staff, and issues. Policies and procedures specific to the department and not covered in the general orientation should be presented.” The SAA manual suggests that the departmental orientation include definitions, a mission statement, goals, functions, a collecting policy, the “organization and composition of the collection,” a historical overview, and an “organizational overview.” While several of these components are shared by all library departments, others have a much greater emphasis in archives. Much more so than in other departments, the archives has to explain exactly what it is and what it does to a new employee. The writers of the SAA manual warn that:

Archival terminology can be confusing for several reasons. First, the vocabulary used by archivists contains words or phrases that are not widely used elsewhere. Second, there are terms that have more specialized meanings in archival usage. In order to familiarize assistants with such terminology a glossary or list of definitions should be provided.

The manual also emphasizes the importance of informing all new workers about basic archival theory and preservation:

How the collection is organized and what it actually contains should be explained to students. An explanation of the principles of provenance and original order as well as the practice of arranging and describing records at levels will assist students in understanding collection organization. Students need to understand the types of materials with which they will be working. Never forget to stress that the collection is irreplaceable and/or unique so that students understand the need for careful and secure handling of the materials.

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54 Kathman and Kathman, PLUS, 24.
55 SAA, 19.
Orientation and training may be discrete procedures, or they may be combined, especially if they are administered at solely the departmental level. Writing manuals for individual archives can be difficult, as tasks are much less routine than in other departments.56

After the basic introduction to the work environment and its staff, the student is ready for training. The literature suggests several different methods of training student employees including “computer-assisted instruction, handbooks, videos, other student employees, and so on, but the immediate supervisor should be the person whom the employees view as responsible for the training.”57 Traditionally, there has been a strong on-the-job training component to archival learning. With so many new terms and procedures to learn, it is especially helpful to provide a manual. This will also ensure continuity of work and procedure. Michael D. and Jane M. Kathman have written several books and articles on training student assistants. They support the use of a manual because it is available for later reference and stops the supervisor from overloading a new employee with too much information. In going through processes that need to be completed, it is generally advisable for the supervisor to demonstrate how things are done. In her article about student assistants in law libraries, Katherine Elizabeth Malmquist affirms, “Demonstration of correct techniques is more important than explanation of the method.”58

The Kathmans are advocates of thorough training for student assistants and believe that many of the problems often associated with student assistants stem from inadequate training and the attitude which leads to this training gap. By failing to value

56 Floyd and Oram, 445.
57 Kathman and Kathman, Training, 179.
58 Malmquist, 308.
and, subsequently, train students, “supervisors run the risk of not only the inefficient use of valuable resources, but also a bad employment situation for the student, the supervisor, and the library. This can be a cause of inadequate service.”⁵⁹ The supervisor should begin with priority needs and allow for training to last at least several weeks, perhaps providing a formal checklist of skills and tasks that need to be covered. It is vital that the supervisor have sufficient time to spare for this on-going training, rather than trying to squeeze it in among other immediately necessary tasks. The Kathmans agree with Andrew Melnyk’s assertion that “an average student aide needs at least two months of work training before he/she starts performing quite efficiently” and believe that supervisors should be permitted flexible enough schedules to accomplish this task.⁶⁰ There should be an open dialogue between supervisor and the supervised, with students being comfortable enough to ask questions and supervisors able to fix problems in a positive and constructive way.⁶¹ An added difficulty is that this is often a student’s first job and he or she needs to be exposed to “basic elements of employment, such as punctuality, performance expectations, breaks and holidays, and so on.”⁶²

The Kathmans also suggest collecting feedback on the training program. This can be done formally by sending out a questionnaire to the employees that went through the training, or by monitoring employees’ work performance and judging how well they perform their assigned tasks. They clarify that this evaluation should be of the training process itself and not of the student employees. The Kathmans also put the burden of

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⁵⁹ Kathman and Kathman, Training, 176.
⁶¹ Constantinou, 22.
obtaining productivity on the supervisor, adding “[if] the students are not performing as expected, then the supervisor should look first at the training program and only after that at an individual student’s performance.”

**Tasks and Supervision**

The first hurdle in effective supervision is ensuring that the right individual is assigned to perform the supervision. In the mid-1980s, the Kathmans discovered that “those who supervise student employees often have not had experience in supervision.”

This concern is less frequently addressed in more recent literature, but it is not clear if this is due to increased training for these mid-level supervisors or the elimination of these positions in an effort to cut costs. Recent literature is more likely to focus on the possibility of placing students in supervisory roles.

In his book *The Management of College and University Archives*, William J. Maher cautions the supervisor that there are still many tasks that are not appropriate for students to perform: “It would be unwise to rely on students for appraisal, records management, general reference room service, or many technical areas of conservation. Students simply lack the breadth, knowledge, and expertise to perform efficiently and proficiently in these areas.” Maher feels that students are best utilized for clerical-type work, such as removing staples and making preservation photocopies of acidic materials, but “given the tendency of inexperienced staff to have rather cavalier attitudes toward the integrity of the original order, archivists should be hesitant to give student staff

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65 Maher, 254.
unsupervised responsibility for arrangement.” However, some institutions are willing to assign greater responsibility to their student workers.

In a paper focused on a computing environment, Mark B. Johnson encourages a broad use of student labor: “Although the students are quite useful doing many of the monotonous tasks which full-time staff usually dread, it is important not to limit them to these. They too need mental stimulation and desire a feeling of accomplishment, so why not let them loose on projects of a greater scope?” There are instances where student employees with experience and a good record have been promoted into supervisory roles over other student assistants or given special projects to complete independently. F. Jay Fuller, of the Meriam Library of California State University Chico, reported good results with a program of hiring student supervisors. The students were able to take over much of the training of new students, free permanent staff from answering more basic questions, and supervise the department on nights and weekends. The Scott Memorial Library at Pacific University formed a student assistant advisory panel made up of representatives from the various departments and a supervising staff member to “focus on creating a team-based approach to the work environment among student assistants, and [improve] student assistant training.”

In an important survey conducted in 1992, Barbara L. Floyd and Richard W. Oram discovered, “A significant number of university archives are using undergraduate student employees in their repositories in a variety of tasks ranging from the routine to

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66 Maher, 250-251.
67 Johnson, 379.
68 Malmquist, 312.
70 Alex Toth and Elaine Bortles, “‘I’ll Take Circulation policies for 100, Alex,’ or Fostering the Team-Based Approach Among Library Student Assistants,” PNLA Quarterly 67, no. 4 (Summer 2003).
the complex.” The mean number of undergraduate employees in the study was 4.4, each working about 11.8 hours per week. Additionally, 37.3 % of the institutions described the work done by undergraduates as being on a “professional” level with 86.6 % agreeing that “there is a place for undergraduate employees in a university archives department in other than routine or clerical-type jobs.” 71 Much of this professional work is done in the service of processing collections.

Despite all of the innovative programs and creative ways to use student labor, Emile C. White’s conclusion is still accurate: “At the very least, students constitute a labor reserve for the monotonous and repetitious tasks that are necessary for successful library operation. Their willingness to perform largely time-consuming, routine chores in the midst of their own intellectual accomplishments has contributed significantly to the professional posture of academic librarianship.” 72

**Motivation, Rewards, and Evaluation**

Johnson stresses many times how good supervision can produce high quality work, “Motivation is intimately intertwined with management, thus effectiveness in the latter will usually result in highly motivated and productive employees.” 73 One important thing for supervisors to note is that many of the students they employ are there because they need the money, not because they have a particular desire to enter the library field. As one interlibrary loan supervisor explains:

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72 White, 97.
73 Johnson, 381.
We are aware that not every student who signs up to work in the library is here because they want to be a librarian someday, or that they have a burning desire to photocopy hundreds of pages of journal articles. We know that for some it just seemed a tad better than washing dishes for dining services. So we developed a number of techniques to make the job interesting and rewarding for the student, and productive for the department.  

This must be balanced by what Emile C. White calls “the recruitment zeal of the library profession, the active, admitted consideration of student assistants as potential librarians.” While some of these students do discover a deeper interest the library field through work, their motivations for working, unless they are library or archives administration graduate students, are often more practical.

Several libraries have experimented with monetary incentives. Strict work-study rules do allow for yearly merit raises, but departments themselves have occasionally managed to implement financial rewards. One computing department instituted a new system in the early 1990s in which student workers “would be eligible for a promotion, a raise and a new title after they had met criteria which had been established.” They reported that this new system worked:

Morale is up and our retention is as well. The fact that we have more stringent requirements for advancement than other departments has helped our program. Our student workers are proud of their accomplishments and know that their promotion was obtained by increasing their knowledge and skill. By being directly involved in developing the process in the department and in the University as a whole, we have also strengthened our relationship with the Financial Aid and the Treasurer’s offices. This has led to better systems of recruitment and speeded up the processing of the students within the system.

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74 Concetta Maresco, “Like a Family: Surrogate Moms in Interlibrary Loan,” *Library Mosaics* 7 (July/August 1997): 19.
75 White, 94.
77 Hughes, 129.
While their successes are worth noting, it is important to remember that computing environments often have more available funding and greater opportunity for advancement than many library departments. However, an experiment in Texas university libraries in the early 1990s also had similar results. Administrators discovered that “Both pay given across the board and pay tied to a goal did positively influence the productivity of part-time workers in this project.” With budgets already tight, it is rare that rewards for good work can take any monetary form, however non-financial awards can be just as effective. At Malmquist’s law library, graduating staff are treated to lunch and during the winter holidays, permanent staff bring “goodie bags” of homemade foods, candy, and a personalized card to the students which are “a nice way of saying ‘thank you’ for working during the semester, and it gets them through their finals.” Rewarding student employees helps to lower the high turnover rate. Maintaining well-trained and motivated employees, rather than starting over each year with a fresh group, makes the student assistants an even more cost-effective resource.

It is difficult to balance the schedules of student workers with the needs of the department, especially during exam periods. One library’s approach is to ask student assistants to sign a form agreeing to work half of their usual hours during exam week. They are allowed to schedule these hours however they would like, but must complete them in order to retain their jobs for the next semester. Other supervisors harness peer pressure to persuade students that failing to show up to work as scheduled hurts both the

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79 Malmquist, 311.
library and their fellow workers. Rules and discipline must be consistent for students to accept these measures as fair.\textsuperscript{81} Indeed, fostering a “well-structured work environment” is one of the most frequently cited methods of keeping students both productive and motivated.\textsuperscript{82}

Evaluation of student workers should be ongoing and can include both informal assessments of day-to-day activities and formal written reports detailing a student’s strongest and weakest qualities. Malmquist suggests that written evaluations be retained so that they can be used when a supervisor is called upon to provide a professional reference.\textsuperscript{83} Ruth Ann Edwards elaborates on the meaning of these references, “Many times college supervisors are contacted for job recommendations for students after graduation. In other words, the library work experience is a real job.”\textsuperscript{84} The Kathmans tie motivation and effective evaluation of student assistants to the formulation of accurate “performance measures.” These performance measures should “be based on an up-to-date job description; be focused on results, not activities; be realistic and reasonable; be observable and measurable; be controllable; and be understandable, not too wordy, and not too numerous.”\textsuperscript{85} Such guidelines make it easier for students to understand their responsibilities and accomplish them appropriately and also assist supervisors in monitoring this progress.

\textsuperscript{81} Walker and Fliotsos, 69.
\textsuperscript{83} Malmquist, p. 313.
\textsuperscript{84} Edwards, p. 92.
Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine how managers in the university archives and special collections department of a university library use student assistants. The aim of this research was to answer the question: has the continued growth of student labor in the university archives and special collections environment increased the productivity of these institutions or has the time devoted to training these temporary workers been counterproductive? Through this investigation, the goal was to determine trends and gain insight into the most efficient ways to use this growing subset of archival employees. The resulting analysis will be useful to both a current manager of student assistants and one who is considering adding them to the department’s staff.

This study was conducted through grounded research. Data for this study were gathered through personal interviews with the individuals at university archives and special collections that have the most direct supervisory authority over their departments’ student assistants. All interviews were conducted in person. The focus was limited to institutions in North Carolina, chosen from a list of affiliated organizations provided by the Society of North Carolina Archivists.86 A letter describing the research project and

its intended purpose was sent to individuals meeting the inclusion criteria. The letter fully identified the primary investigator, presented what would be expected of participants, and discussed how the information they provide will be confidentially handled. Interested participants were asked to return a signed copy of this letter, providing their consent to participate. Upon receipt of the signed letter of interest, participants were called to set up a face-to-face interview. The participants were asked to participate to advance the study of library science, particularly in the field of archives and special collections management and did not receive compensation in any form for participating in this study.

Each interview consisted of closed and open questions regarding the use of student assistants at the participant’s institution. Privacy and confidentiality were upheld by not naming specific individuals or institutions. The interviews were conducted in a private setting and notes and transcripts from the interviews were only accessible to me and my faculty advisor. The colleagues who were given access to the interviews and notes to validate the coding scheme were not made aware of the identities of the subjects. These materials remained confidential until the close of the study, at which point they will be destroyed.

After all interviews were conducted, the responses were coded and scaled so that they could be compared more accurately. After this coding was finished, two colleagues were asked to code the same data. Their results were compared with the researcher’s to validate the findings. The co-coders had about 85% agreement. The disagreements were generally minor and centered on which interviewee was the most or least supportive of an idea. These findings were then synthesized into a narrative describing the ways student
assistants have been used and the philosophies of work and education that underlie how their labor is directed.

This study has resulted in a unique set of data on employer attitudes with respect to student assistants. This data can be used to research the best ways to utilize student assistants in university archives and special collections departments. All archival professionals can use this data in their management of student assistants. In addition to the data itself, insight about the most efficient ways to use this labor pool has also been provided.
Results

Introduction

Supervisors were enthusiastic and interested in discussing this topic. By engaging them in personal interviews rather than providing them with fixed surveys, it was possible to solicit a much richer response and probe deeper into their comments. This has resulted in a more narrative than statistical approach to presenting the findings.

Four individuals who directly supervise student assistants in special collections and/or university archives departments of university libraries were interviewed. In order to maintain anonymity, each department is referred here under the pseudonym *North Department, South Department, East Department* or *West Department*, and each individual as *North Supervisor, South Supervisor*, etc. The four institutions chosen differ in significant ways. Although this sample is small, it will be meaningful for supervisors at a wide variety of institutions.

*North Department* is part of the main library at one of the state’s premier private universities. It is responsible for university archives, including the papers of various academic departments, administrative offices, publications, and student organizations. It is affiliated with the rare book, manuscripts, and special collections library, but maintains its own administration under the direction of the university archivist. The individual interviewed is a full-time archivist at the university archives. North University does not
have a library science or public history program, but it is very close to several universities that do have such programs.

*South Department*’s university archives and special collections departments are headed by different individuals, but they overlap significantly, sharing the same physical space and resources. Two individuals at the university, one from university archives and one from special collections and rare books were interviewed. Due to the small size and extensive overlap of the departments, they are represented as one single entity. *South University* is part of the UNC system and has a master’s program in library science.

*East Department*, known as “Technical Services and Manuscripts,” is in charge of processing a wide variety of collections. It parallels the work of university archives and folklife/sound & images, all three of which are under the public services department with a common head, the “Curator of Manuscripts and Director of the Historical Collection.” Although the units interact frequently, they maintain some level of autonomy in practice, including how they hire and utilize student assistants. The comments of the supervisor interviewed from manuscripts do not necessarily echo those of supervisors from the other departments and should not be taken as such. For the sake of this inquiry, the most useful variety of responses came from interviewing individuals from separate institutions, but another potentially fruitful project would be to concentrate only on a university such as this and interview individuals from these different units. East University is a highly regarded state university with a graduate school for library and information science.

*West Department* is also somewhat centralized, with staff administering manuscripts and rare books, university archives, and public services all organized in one
physical space and under the leadership of a head and assistant head. Student assistants are also often shared between groups, completing tasks for either manuscripts or university archives depending on current departmental needs. At this department, the “Assistant Head/Curator of Collections” who oversees both manuscripts and rare books in addition to other overall departmental business was interviewed. West University is a heavily science oriented state university, but does offer a graduate degree in public history with a concentration in archival administration. This public history degree can be administered jointly with East’s degree in library science, through a cooperative agreement between the two schools.

Practicums, Interns, and Archival Education

All four supervisors were unanimous in their conviction that practical experience is an essential component of archival education. All agreed that there is a place for classroom education, but this was accepted with varying degrees of support. The East University and North University supervisors were the most supportive of classroom learning and both discussed the link between theory and practice. The East Supervisor asserted that many ideas learned in library school could only be fully understood when the student is able to experience them first-hand. The North Supervisor believed that certain necessary topics, such as encoding finding aids in EAD, could not be adequately taught in a classroom, but added that an academic setting is the most appropriate arena for exposing students to critical theory and teaching them to ask “why” when confronted with archival practices.
The South University Archives Supervisor stressed the importance of an internship or work experience *particularly* for archives administration students. When the supervisor attended library school at South University, there was only one course related to archives. An internship reinforced and expended on ideas learned in this single class. Today, there are no archives courses offered at South. Since the supervisor has worked at South, there has not been a single archival intern. North University has also not had any interns. Unlike South, North does not have a library school and is located in an area where there are many other institutions that provide such opportunities. It appears as though the absence of archival interns at North is due to the placement of students into assignments at their own schools or through the closer administrative ties between East and West stemming from their cooperative degree program. The lack of interns at South speaks to the problem Richard J. Cox outlines in his work. Due to lack of exposure, in this case an archives-related class, archival administration is a field that people will only discover accidentally, rather than actively seek out.

While agreeing with the need for classroom education, the West University Supervisor was the most adamant about the need for practical experience. She explained:

I believe practical experience is essential. I understand that theory may be taught in the classroom but there is nothing like having that practical hands-on experience before you are about to embark on your own job. Even though certain positions are identified as entry-level, it is important to have some real experience and you'll find that candidates that with some professional experience or para-professional experience will normally be favored over those who just simply have classroom instruction under their belt. I think library science is still viewed as a professional degree rather than a more typical scholarly program such as English or History. And as such you are entering a profession and you are expected to have that type of experience. In archives and special collections the experience might be public services, it might be processing or cataloguing experience, but some form to establish work history is important.
In this supervisor’s opinion, the purpose of the Master’s degree is to be “professional” rather than “scholarly” preparation. Having been in a position to hire individuals for entry-level, post-degree positions, this supervisor has favored candidates with real experience and a work history. The supervisor added that a manager should understand that one is not only there to work, but to learn, “The goal of the supervisor of an intern is to make sure they are training and educating the student.” Both the East and West Supervisors have monitored many internships in their current positions with students from both the library science and public history programs. Both also treat their interns very much like their paid graduate student employees, except that they are given discrete projects on a smaller scale so that they can be fully completed in the limited length of the internship. They are also not able to work with as many different kinds of materials or different tasks.

**Attitude**

When asked, “Do you feel a professional duty to train the next generation of leaders in your field?” the supervisors gave different responses depending on which group of students they were discussing. The East Supervisor described the department as a “teaching hospital” and explained that part of the reason why students are hired, rather than para-professionals, is to add to their education. The West Supervisor provided the greatest context in responding to this question by citing an oft-discussed issue at ALA: “the graying of the profession.” The supervisor believes that working closely with new students is a way of responding to this. The supervisor also noted that there is personal pride in passing on the knowledge of traditions and work. These new workers will need
this foundation, as they deal with emerging problems such as improving electronic access.

During the interviews, the undergraduate workers were regarded differently than graduates and interns. The East Supervisor confirmed that most undergraduates don’t view archival employment as training for a field; rather it is just a general type of work experience. But if students do develop an interest, they are encouraged and given further information. Several of the supervisor’s undergraduates have ultimately decided to attend graduate school in library science. Although not all of the South Supervisor’s students decided to pursue careers in the library field, the supervisor was still left with a sense of accomplishment because students had learned about what it means to work and could usefully apply this to any professional career.

Understanding that student assistants are “students first,” the supervisors explained that, with a reasonable level of flexibility in scheduling, the vast majority of student employees have been able to successfully manage the balance between work and school. The main concern has been that students take responsibility for making up missed time or discuss necessary schedule changes in advance. As the East Supervisor explained, they should not be let off too easy as they are learning to be professionals. The North Supervisor recounted a problem with one former undergraduate employee who did not keep scheduled hours. Since the student did not need the job and did not have any educational interest regarding the archives field, it was not a priority. The student and the North Supervisor came to the mutual decision that the student should be replaced with someone who had more motivation to work.
None of the individuals interviewed had negative stereotypes of student workers. Instead, they advocated employment of undergraduates. The South Supervisors had such good experiences with student workers at previous jobs, that upon being hired at South University and discovering that the department did not hire any undergraduates, it was decided to create positions for them.

When asked, “Can student workers perform at the same level of proficiency as full-time staff when given similar tasks?” all supervisors answered affirmatively, but several added significant caveats to their assent. The West Supervisor cautioned that the students need to be highly motivated in order to perform at a professional level. The South Supervisor emphasized the necessity of proper training before this could be accomplished. However, the East Supervisor explained that what ultimately separates professional staff from students is experience and confidence. The supervisor explains:

When they don't [perform at a professional level] it's because they just haven't had enough experience. There are certain things you learn after you do enough [processing] and you have seen enough different collections and you've thought about enough different collections. Certain things that students might have to agonize over or worry about a decision and whether they are doing it the right way or whether this is the right decision to make, somebody with just a couple of years of experience might just look at it and say "oh yeah... this is how I want to do that." Either she knows that that will be the right decision, or to understand that either way it will be fine and not worry about it.

In order to move this process along, the East Supervisor tries to make sure that students have an opportunity to work on a wide variety of collections and formats when employed at East.
Funding Options

The number of student assistants, the breakdown between graduate and undergraduate students, and the sources of their funding varies in each of the institutions in this study. North University generally has one undergraduate assistant and one or two graduate students, with the undergraduate funded by the department’s budget and the graduates paid for by a specifically allocated endowment. Hiring undergraduates regardless of Federal Work-Study (FWS) funding is unusual, but the North Supervisor explains that North University, as a private school, has a large number of students that do not qualify for FWS positions. While the department would accept FWS students, it has felt that in order to find suitable workers, they have to expand the pool of potential candidates.

South University’s addition of two FWS students, in addition to their two departmentally-funded positions, was an initiative brought about by two relatively new supervisors. The success of this endeavor has convinced the department to hire two additional FWS students for the upcoming academic year. The department at East University typically hires three graduate students and two FWS undergraduates. One of the graduate students is paid out of a special fund in the library budget, not the individual department. However, budget cuts may force the department to hire only one additional non-library-funded graduate student in the upcoming year. Although FWS students are essentially free to a department, even if more than two acceptable candidates were found, the East Supervisor cautioned that departments must be realistic about how many can be managed. On one occasion, East Department had five FWS students which proved to be somewhat chaotic and it will not likely hire more than three at one time in the future.
Specific grant-funded projects can change this arrangement, however, as one grant to transcribe audio interviews briefly led to the hiring of 8-10 undergraduate assistants.

Compared to the other three institutions, West University has a significantly larger group of undergraduate and graduate student assistants. Currently West has three FWS undergraduate assistants and seven graduate students paid from a wide variety of sources. Two graduate students are chosen and funded by West University’s public history program in a cooperative agreement with the department; one is funded by another campus department for a special project; two others are being paid from donations from private individuals or organizations to help offset the costs of processing their donated collections; and the remaining two are being funded by the library for limited positions to assist the visual image archivist in a digitization project. Those students whose funding does not dictate their activities, such as the public history graduate students and the FWS undergraduates, are often shared among the department’s manuscript, archives, and rare book areas. The department has previously been granted funds by the library for hiring students on other special projects, such as designing web pages and databases, instituting EAD, or staffing the reference desk on weekends. It also frequently accepts interns fulfilling their practicum in public history.

**Publicizing Work and Job Descriptions**

Methods of publicizing jobs varied depending on the position being advertised to solicit FWS students. Each university had specific procedures to solicit FWS students. Some students go through the financial aid office and/or a special website for Work-Study recipients where all of the campus FWS positions are posted. Non-FWS positions
are also often formally posted through the library or campus human resource
departments. With the largest number of employees, the supervisors from East and West
presented the largest variety of outlets and tactics for publicizing their open positions.
The most effective form of publicity the supervisors cited is “word of mouth” among
students and communications among faculty from the various university campuses. The
South Supervisor confirms, “Our experience has been that if you get one good student,
that they tell their friends about the posting those are good candidates.” Faculty advisors
and professors work hard to help students find jobs that pay and sites that will host their
internships. Other members of the university staff contribute by posting job
announcements on listserves sponsored by academic programs, student groups, and
library or archival associations.

All of the supervisors interviewed provided sample job descriptions. Using pre-
designed paper- or Web-based forms provided by the university office of financial aid
strictly limited how much information could be provided. A difficulty in writing the job
descriptions is to convey, in a limited space, what an archive is and what kind of duties
are expected of student workers. In a department such as reference or circulation, it is
expected that students are more familiar with the kind of tasks staff there might
encounter. The shortest description comes from West Department, which explains that
the worker will, “Inventory manuscripts collection. Prepare container lists. Re-house
manuscript collections in archival safe storage containers. Ability to lift 30 pounds.” In
this limited space, the supervisor is forced to use archival terminology which will be
meaningless to the vast majority of individuals who read the posting. The South
Department’s posting provides a short introductory paragraph on what the department does:

[It] houses non-circulating books, manuscripts, and artifacts selected because of their significance, rarity or uniqueness. These materials are housed in a secure and climate-controlled environment to ensure longevity for future generations of patrons. Proper handling of all materials is required. Special collections maintains a number of valuable and important collections.

The descriptions from North and West are similar, including lists of preferred qualifications/abilities (e.g., dependability, follow directions, etc.) and short narratives. East University provides a short, but clear, description of what archivists do:

“[Archivists] [w]ork with the raw materials of history – letters, diaries, unpublished writings, photographs, audio and video tapes, and other items – some more than 100 years old and some very recent. Work in a relaxed, congenial atmosphere. Somewhat flexible daytime hours.” The East Supervisor is not concerned about having a long list of preferred qualifications. The supervisor fully admits to “trying to scare students off,” explaining, “I try to give a pretty clear idea, especially with undergraduates, about the kind of things they are going to be doing because ... students who are going to be good at it will be attracted to it . . . and if they are scared by some of the things, like how routine it is, or it is just sorting or labeling, that is good.” Although tasks do vary, this ensures that only the most committed applicants are hired.

**Hiring Process**

The first step in the hiring process is to determine the standards needed for each open position. With clear job descriptions that list required or preferred skills and describe the goals of the department, this task is made easier. The requirements for
undergraduate and graduate positions differ because their levels of responsibility and needs for critical thinking differ. The main difference is the supervisor’s requirement of some direct, or at least academic, experience in archival practice for graduate applicants. Even North Department, located in a school that does not offer a degree in library science or public history, actively recruits students from those programs at neighboring universities. While all interviewees discussed the educational potential of their jobs, only the North Supervisor indicated that too much experience might cause an applicant to be rejected. The first line of the job description for the North graduate position reads, “The [North] University Archives seeks applicants for a one-year internship designed to introduce students to work in an institutional archives.” The North Supervisor clarifies, “We do consider our internships to be educational in nature as well, so for someone who has too much experience and maybe won't really gain anything by being employed by us or it won't add to their credentials or experience, then we would prefer a candidate who has more growth potential.” If a student is already highly experienced, the archives may benefit, but the opportunity is taken from an individual who would benefit more from the experience. Graduate students are expected to apply for positions using resumes and cover letters rather than pre-designed employment applications. The East Supervisor adds one additional requirement for graduate applicants that is not solicited by the other supervisors, a writing sample. The supervisor explains, “With graduate students, beyond reliability, the primary thing I look for is writing ability. It seems to be the thing that correlates the most with understanding how to arrange a collection. It is the best indicator I've ever been able to figure out. Writing ability is important because you need to be able to write a finding aid. But it also seems to be that people who are good writers
are much more likely to just understand how to arrange a collection.” The supervisor also has a preference for graduate students with a specific kind of scholastic background, “Library science students without a History background run into a problem that it seems like it is harder for them to understand what researchers are going to need and going to be looking for and so certain things that seem really obvious if you have done research yourself aren't so obvious.”

Funding often limits supervisors’ choices in selecting undergraduate assistants. Students who come with Federal Work-Study money are often the only affordable option. Also, despite publicizing the positions, archives tend to get a very small number of applicants. The Supervisors of South Department admitted to competing for candidates with other library departments that can afford to pay higher wages. It is not expected that undergraduates have previous experience, but related experience of any sort, including secretarial and computer work, is appreciated. A student’s major is not an issue, although the East Supervisor said that the positions tend to attract English, History, and Journalism majors. Desirable qualities include attention to detail, maturity, trustworthiness, and reliability. Practical considerations include flexibility in scheduling and legible handwriting. The East Supervisor explained that having a physical employment application provides a good opportunity to observe handwriting. The West Supervisor confirmed, “We take student schedules into account in our work case it's a seven day operation a flexible schedule can be just as important as a strong reference.” Only reliability was more important, “We can certainly train students to sit at a reference desk or to process collections but we need to know that they can come in so we can train them.” The South Supervisor added “maturity,” as an important quality, especially in an
archives environment, “I think maturity helps because these people are going to be working around rare books which are very expensive. They are going to be working around various archives and manuscript records and documents which are unique and rare and so we really prefer they have a little bit maturity to them.”

All of the supervisors preferred hiring underclassmen. Hiring freshmen or sophomores gives departments a greater chance of retaining the same workers for multiple years, cutting down on training time. The East Supervisor suggested staggering class years, as the East Department will have all three of its graduate assistants leave at the close of this academic year. This will lead to a stressful period of training new staff at the beginning of the school year and the employees will miss out on peer-teaching. The North Supervisor, in a similar situation, agreed, “We had a really great undergraduate last year, but we got her as a senior so we only had her for one year. So specifically this year we hired our current undergraduate we said lets get an underclassman and then there is potential for us to keep the student for all four years, and then it keeps the time investment you have to make for training to a minimum.”

Once the applicants are vetted, each supervisor sets up interviews. The stringency of the process varies with both the position and the institution. South, East, and West all conduct informal interviews with both graduate and undergraduate students. The goal is to get a sense of each student’s interest level and communication skills. The interview includes an in-depth discussion of what the student will be doing and a brief tour of the facilities. North conducts a rigorous search for graduate students, interviewing the top three or four candidates for several hours in which they meet with each staff member and participate in a group interview. North is also the most likely of the institutions to call
references, particularly if they are having difficulty deciding between candidates. The other supervisors admitted to conducting only sporadic reference checks, with West conducting them primarily for limited special projects, such as website and database design.

Orientation and Training / Tasks and Supervision

All of the departments had similar orientation procedures for new student assistants. Students do not attend a general orientation for the library. Instead, each student is given a personal departmental orientation. South and East Departments both provide specialized checklists for use with this orientation procedure to ensure that nothing vital is overlooked. The student keeps the list for future reference. South’s checklist, for example, includes a complete listing of the areas that will be toured, administrative information that must be submitted, an explanation of how to handle different types of material, and an outline of the position’s basic tasks.

A variety of processing manuals are used by each department. The training procedure generally begins with the student examining the manual(s) before they are assigned to a specific task. North and East also have specialized EAD (Encoded Archival Description) manuals and West is in the process of creating one. South does not intend to teach EAD to its student assistants at this time, but may consider it in the future. These manuals are mainly used for reference, as the bulk of training for both graduates and undergraduates is done with one-on-one, hands-on instruction. More informal training is done peer-to-peer, with more experienced students assisting newer employees. The West Supervisor explained, “Sometimes I have them learn from their peers. At times a project
such as [data-entry in an excel database] might be more easily explained by a peer.

Undergraduates in particular are more willing to listen to their classmates.” The training of undergraduates is much more limited in scope; generally, they learn only the specific skills they will need, rather than how to take command of an entire project. However, the East Supervisor has a special introductory project for undergraduates that are completely new to the archives field:

Most undergraduates have never done research in primary sources before so I do, as part of the orientation, give them a little research exercise. I tell them to think of something they are interested in that we might have information about. I suggest their hometown if they are from around here. I have them register as a researcher, find two collections and then actually look at those two collections or some part of them, then come back and tell me what they found. The purpose of that is to give them an idea of where their work is headed and how people use collections and what the boxes of stuff look like when researchers are using them what finding aids look like . . . all those kinds of things. I want them to see that at least once, so they know what they are contributing to.

Reminding students that their work matters can keep them motivated and productive. As the North Supervisor adds, it is important that they know they are not “just drudge work. Someone will depend on what [they] are doing.”

The boundaries between graduate and undergraduate tasks can be blurred, depending on both institutional policy and an individual student’s ability. Usually, the undergraduates do more routine tasks, such as re-housing materials, creating basic inventories, filling photocopy orders, and general clerical support. Graduate students are placed in positions in which they must make critical decisions and fully process collections. They are responsible for examining, weeding, sorting, re-housing, describing, and (occasionally) exhibiting the finished product. The North Supervisor makes an argument that EAD encoding of finding aids might actually be best taught before collection processing, “I think that EAD kind of helps people understand the
structure of a finding aid and that understanding can help you when you are processing to put that structure in place while you are processing or be thinking ahead.”

At West, several undergraduates have shown interest and aptitude in learning the archival craft. They have been given tasks similar to those of the graduate students, including fully processing a collection and producing the resulting finding aid in EAD. The West Supervisor encourages undergraduates to do advanced level work. Even the job description is open-ended enough to accommodate this. The supervisor explains, “fairly low level responsibilities are advertised. When the students are here we really judge the type of work which they might be capable and we might expand ... the bottom line here for both students and permanent staff is ‘other duties as assigned.’” The supervisor explains the rationale behind this decision:

We have had some fairly advanced undergraduates who are ready to take on graduate level responsibilities. That's something advanced undergraduates typically do in their classwork as well . . . their academic studies. They can always take courses that are cross-listed between either undergraduate and graduate, that's typically a different workload. I view them as having the same ability here. If I have, for example, a History major, who is particularly interested in processing collections, wants to learn more about archival studies, and wants to consider going to graduate school to get a professional degree, that's a student who I am going to involve in processing activities, cataloguing and perhaps encoding as well. I look for potential, but I also look for interest. If the student is sincerely interested in ‘making a career of it’ he is someone I am going to have do what I consider graduate level work. For the most part, undergraduates may type call numbers, might do some data-entry, shelve some books, re-house or inventory collections, but typically the graduate students are involved in full processing, creating finding aids, and encoding collections. It varies based on departmental priorities.

The West Supervisor is an enthusiastic recruiter for the profession, who believes that interest and potential can be more important than grade level.

The East Supervisor has reservations about such a practice. Undergraduates do not receive the same level of compensation, and in the opinion of the East Supervisor,
should not be responsible for the same level of production, “It's kind of a fine line to walk because if they get interested, you want to let them do some of the stuff they are interested in, on the other hand were paying them $6.50 an hour and it doesn't seem fair to ask them to do very much intellectual work for $6.50 an hour.” Further complicating this issue are the occasional graduate students who take “undergraduate” level positions so that they can gain archival experience. While it is tempting to fully train such individuals and group them with the other graduate students, they are still needed for the lower level work. The South Supervisor added, “They aren't here to learn to become archivists, whereas someone doing a practicum or an internship would be. You gear your training to what they need to know and when they need to know it. I always figure that there is no sense in overburdening them with a whole lot of information because I always tell them the most important thing is that you're here to get an education. Classes come first, the job comes second.” At North, the concern is primarily one of time, “The undergraduates that we have been employed have been stellar, but there are only here for 10 hours per week and you really have to have more time to spend with the student to do the training on more complex things like EAD and MARC. So I’m not saying that an undergraduate couldn't [perform at a professional level]. It's just that there is not enough time to get training done.”

**Motivation, Rewards, and Evaluation**

In each department, evaluations are generally informal and based on day-to-day observations and feedback on projects, such as finding aids. Formal procedures exist for censuring Federal Work-Study students, but no supervisors reported the firing of a
student assistant. The only formal evaluative procedure takes place when a FWS student employee is leaving, too late to be of use in the current position. The North Supervisor has seen the value in this formal procedure and recently instituted one, “This year with my academic-year intern evaluation, I did an interim evaluation where I had her write up her goals and her accomplishments and we talked about those things . . . because I want to use the internship to replicate a professional position, but that's not something that the library requires me to do. I would like to continue doing this kind of evaluation.”

With such tight budgets, monetary rewards such as promotions and pay raises are not feasible. Only FWS students are given the opportunity for yearly merit raises, if they remain with a department. Graduate students usually have higher compensation, with students at East receiving tuition remission and health insurance in addition to their regular pay. West’s public history graduate students receive similar packages, but they are paid for by the academic department and not the archives.

Many graduates and undergraduates are “working for a reference,” as the West Supervisor explains, or merely working for a paycheck, but their efforts are recognized by the department and the library as a whole. Public recognition includes student appreciation lunches, end of semester goody bags, and home-made foods.

**From Student Assistants to Managers**

Each person involved in this inquiry had been a student assistant at one point and reported gaining skills and insight during the experience. My final question to the supervisors asked how their own student experiences have shaped their management styles. Each supervisor expressed an ability to empathize with the challenges facing students who are balancing so many different commitments. Each has created specific
procedures inspired by this previous experience. For the North Supervisor, it is important to value the students’ time by making it fruitful, always having the next project ready, and always explaining why something has been assigned and its importance, no matter how routine it seems. The West Supervisor repeatedly emphasized that students should know why their efforts are important and that they are not just a source of cheap labor, but deserve to be well-treated. The supervisor also stresses that students be educated about the archives field and working in general.
Conclusion

The literature on student assistants rarely addresses graduate students directly. While researching the literature and conducting the interviews, it became clear that this omission was not a serious oversight, but an implied assumption that graduate students are regarded as part-time professionals instead of student assistants. The amount of time graduate students can spend at work is limited and they have classwork to complete, but the interviewees readily acknowledged them as colleagues. The only concerns that were verbalized had to do with the graduate students’ lack of experience. This was not a serious reservation, as every supervisor acknowledged that it was his or her duty to help the graduate students learn and gain confidence in the field; all agreed that the most important aspect of archival education is to “learn by doing.”

Undergraduates are the focus of most of the literature, but there is a greater discrepancy in how they are viewed and utilized from one archival institution to another. Supervisors generally modify the more rigid structures discussed in the literature and take an individualized approach to dealing with these workers. Due to the “recruitment zeal” of the profession, the relatively small size of the university archives and special collections department, and the varying needs of the department (or some combination of these factors), student assistants have more opportunities for variety and intellectual stimulation in their work than students in many other library departments. There is no
guarantee that students will be assigned to higher level tasks as the supervisors were quick to point out the need for workers (preferably not highly compensated) to do the more rote tasks.

Since their roles vary, different standards are adopted during the hiring processes for the undergraduate and graduate students. In all of the institutions, money was a primary issue in the hiring process. Even the one private institution acknowledged funding concerns and the negative impact it could have on hiring. Graduate students often get paid with money from their academic programs, but each of the participating supervisors interviewed admitted to directly funding at least part of their graduate student staff. Most undergraduates were funded with Federal Work-Study money. Despite the problems cited in the literature, the supervisors have had good outcomes using these students. Although the jobs are rarely competitive and the only real limit on hiring is the number one can reasonably manage, the supervisors discovered that those students who actively sought positions in the archives were generally a better fit for the environment. While not an ideal recruitment model, the somewhat obscure nature of archival work rendered the positions self-selecting. The departments can certainly benefit by raising the awareness of their functions and attracting a larger pool of candidates to select from. The only other major consideration was class year; each supervisor noted that maintaining a consistent workforce for several years saved them considerable time in training and fostered a productive peer-learning system. Although they are expected to learn from their work experience, graduate students must have some prior direct or indirect experience, and they are often requested to submit professional resumes or work samples to prospective employers. One supervisor preferred to hire those who could gain the
most from the experience rather than those with the most experience. However, with continuing cuts in funding and permanent staff, it is unclear if supervisors can keep hiring less proven candidates.

Many supervisors began their careers as student employees. Their current attitudes toward these workers was generally positive and they refused to let the few negative experiences taint their opinions of student workers in general. Those without formal feedback systems still saw the value in enhanced communication with their employees and several hoped to institute them eventually. All of the interviewees were enthusiastic and truly interested in shaping the future of the profession through its members; even for those students not committed to an archival career, the supervisors strove to build a mutually beneficial work environment.

This paper sampled only a small number of experiences and opinions from the archival field, but it can provide a solid starting point for an individual who wants to pursue this topic. The most directly useful literature comes from Michael D. and Jane M. Kathman, who, through their articles and seminars, have informed supervisors of the real benefits of addressing the way student assistants are used in any setting. The Society of American Archivists manual *Student Assistants in Archival Repositories* is an adequate beginning, but it does not fully cover the wide range of tasks a student may be asked to perform. It is more appropriate for each archive to fashion a manual to meet its individualized needs. An especially worthwhile avenue for original research would be to survey student workers and see how they view themselves and how they believe they would best be utilized. It may also be interesting to follow these students and track how
many end up in the archives field and how their student assistant experiences shaped their current careers, regardless of their chose field.
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Appendix A
Letter of Consent

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT
CHAPEL HILL

School of Information and Library Science
Student Research Project
Phone# (919) 962-8366; Fax# (919) 962-8071

The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill
CBI# 3360, 100 Manning Hall
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3360

March 26, 2004

Dear Archival Professional:

My name is Jaime Margalotti. I am a graduate student at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I have previously completed a degree in Public History at North Carolina State University and I am employed as a graduate assistant at both the North Carolina State University Special Collections and University Archives and the Southern Historical Collection in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Wilson Library.

I am currently completing a master’s paper entitled “Utilizing Student Library Assistants in University Archives and Special Collections.” My purpose is to determine how student assistants, both undergraduate and graduate, are used in the special collections setting. I not only want to determine what kind of tasks each group of student is assigned, but the reasoning behind this division of labor. It is the goal of my research to provide insight into the most effective ways to utilize this growing segment of the library workforce. I hope that this information can help archival professionals who either currently, or will in the future, manage student assistants.

To perform this investigation, I would like to interview you at your convenience. I prefer to meet with you in person to discuss how your institution employs student assistants. If a personal meeting is not feasible, we can set up a telephone interview. This interview (in person or via telephone) should last approximately 30-45 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary and
you can refrain from answering any questions posed to you or stop the interview at any time. All of the information that you provide will be kept anonymous. Due to my highly specific focus and the format of my investigation, I anticipate interviewing only a small number of subjects.

This research project has been approved by the Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, please contact the Chair of the AA-IRB by telephone at: (919)962-7761 or by email at aa-irb@unc.edu. You can contact them now or at any time in the future. For all questions or concerns about the study itself, please contact me or my Faculty Advisor at our phone numbers or email addresses below.

In order to participate in this project, please return a signed copy of this letter in the envelope provided by April 5 and I will contact you to set up an interview. I can be reached by telephone (919-846-7532) or by email (margj@email.unc.edu). You can also contact my Faculty Advisor, Prof. Deborah Barreau, by telephone (919-966-5042) or by email (barreau@ils.unc.edu). I am happy to answer any questions you may have before setting up an interview or at any time in the future.

Thank you every much for your interest and participation.

Jaime Margalotti
Graduate Student
School of Information and Library Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
margj@email.unc.edu
(919)846-7532

Participant Signature: ____________________________                           Date: ______________
Appendix B
Interview Questions

1. Library Science education first focused primarily on in-service training . . . then there was a backlash. How important do you think practical experience is to the LS student?

2. How many student assistants do you currently employ? What fraction of your department’s staff do they make up? Does this number fluctuate from year to year? If so, why?

3. How many of these are undergraduate students and how many are graduate students?

4. What qualities do you look for in a student employee? Which are most important? Does major or previous experience play a role in this decision?

5. What are your methods of recruiting? Do you post job ads for hiring new employees? What information do the job ads include?

6. Is there a formal application? Describe its major components.

7. Do you schedule interviews with all qualified candidates?

8. Do you check references?

9. Who ultimately chooses the new employees?

10. Are there any special programs that support the hiring of graduate students (fellowships, other funds)? Undergraduates (Federal Work-Study)?

11. When a student is hired do they get a general orientation? From the entire library? the department only? a personalized orientation?


13. Are students assigned individual workstations? Shared workstations? Left to find someplace?

14. If students aren’t included on any library listserves, how is information conveyed to them? Mailboxes?
15. Describe the training method?

16. Is there a manual for employees to consult? Is it specific for your department? Other resources?

17. Are all undergraduate and graduate assistants trained to do the same tasks?

18. If not, is there a differentiation based on education level? Is there another basis for differentiation?

19. What kinds of tasks do student assistants perform?

20. Are these the same tasks performed by permanent staff members?

21. Can student workers perform at the same level of proficiency as full-time staff when given similar tasks?

22. Are student assistants trained in EAD (encoded archival description)? How is this training handled?

23. Who is the primary supervisor for student assistants? Do any student assistants hold supervisory positions over other student assistants?

24. Is there a system of promotion? Pay raises? Other forms of recognition?

25. Any perks? Tuition remission, insurance, Paid time off, overtime?

26. Are students formally evaluated?

27. Do students successfully manage the balance between “student” and “worker”?

28. How often do students ask for recommendations after their job is completed?

29. Have any former student assistants eventually been hired for full-time positions in your institution?

30. Do you feel a professional duty to train the “next generation” of leaders in your field?

31. Have you ever held a student assistant position in a university archives and special collections department? How has it influenced your management style?