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Academic Performance among Student Library Employees: How Library Employment Impacts Grade Point Average and Perception of Success

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Academic Performance among Student Library Employees

How Library Employment Impacts Grade Point Average and Perception of Success

Introduction

For many years, college libraries have employed students to complement the professional staff. The convergence of student financial needs, staffing shortages and growing expectations for expanded library services highlighted the economy of hiring students for more advanced levels of library tasks. While students have long been part of the front desk staff, it is not uncommon now to find students participating in book processing, interlibrary loan functions, managing print periodicals, and even working the reference desk. And while there are many factors that influence a student's academic success, the role of library employment on that success has not yet been thoroughly examined. This research aims at increasing our understanding of the impact of the library beyond its expected function as the hub of academic life on campus by examining the relationship between library employment and academic success. More specifically, it focuses on the grade point average of those who have complemented their academic programs with library work experience, as well as those students' perceptions of how library employment affected their academics.

Researchers have studied the working student for decades but have yet to come to consistent conclusions about the effects of employments on various aspects of a student's life. For example, Ford and Bosworth (1995) completed a thorough investigation among four universities that garnered over 1000 responses (p. 194). The survey covered motivations and needs behind working during college, the effects work had on academics and social life, and the kind of work being done by college students. They argued that "while

data on hours and wage rates are important, other aspects of employment are at least as important in terms of assessing the impact of employment on student life, for example, the distribution of hours, the conditions of work... any assessment of the potential implication of students' employment need to draw together the elements of employment by considering employment profiles" (p. 197). They continue by outlining eight student examples with different combinations of academic hours and employment hours and concluded that focusing solely on "average earnings and hours conceals a variety of circumstances that in turn may impact differently on academic performance or social life" (p. 199). Clearly, not all jobs are created equal, even if students work the same numbers of hours as their peers. While many of their conclusions remain relevant, the date of the study encourages a more recent review of the effects of employment on college students.

It is this argument that has propelled the current investigation into the academic performance of library employees. Library employment offers students consistent exposure to new technologies, research resources, a familiarity with the locations of such resources and a relationship with professional staff that potentially makes librarians more approachable when there is a research need. Library employment has the potential to do more for a student than pay bills because as they work, they inevitably learn skills that could help them in their studies.

Literature Review

The conclusions of studies on how employment affects undergraduate students are as varied as the studies themselves. The

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ABSTRACT

The study of college student employment and its effects on retention, academics, and student satisfaction is not new and yet has come to varying conclusions; also, very little has been reviewed on what impact a student's place of employment may have on their academics. This research examines student employees at a college library and how that specific type of employment has impacted the academic success of those employees. The study used a combination of data, comparing their cumulative grade point average with survey results asking about their perception of the effect library employment had on their academics. The overwhelming majority of students felt that library employment had a positive impact on their academics and this perception was confirmed by their collective, average GPAs when compared to that of their peers. This research expands the knowledge not only in the potential impact of place on academics but also in how college libraries perceive their impact upon student employees and the benefits of such employment.

Peer Reviewed

Library employment has the potential to do more for a student than pay bills because as they work, they inevitably learn skills that could help them in their studies.

debate continues because there is conflicting evidence which supports several possibilities. In a relatively recent study, Watts and Pickering (2000) explored some of the reasons behind the increase in student employment. Their research is based in the United Kingdom (UK), where there have been recent changes to the structure of student financial aid, resulting in a growing need for students to be employed throughout the academic year. This initial study included a small sample size (nine students), which means it is hard to generalize the results, but also had the advantage of in-depth, structured interviews with each participant. Even with such a small sample, the researchers found that “the effects [of employment during term time] existed in a complex relationship with a number of key personal and contextual factors” (p. 131).

Another study based on student perception by Curtis and Williams (2002) focused on part-time employment and how it affected students’ studies, as gathered by a questionnaire distributed among their campus population. The majority of their subjects worked eleven to fifteen hours a week, declared that their part time job did not help with their studies, and responded that they would give up their job if they could afford to (p. 8). According to the students and the conclusions of the authors, the benefits of working- such as adaptation to a work environment and learning to handle finances- did not outweigh the cost to the students’ academic achievement. Unfortunately, Williams and Curtis did not combine this with quantitative data about the students’ grades, so it is impossible to know how the perception and reality converge.

Building on her original study, Watts (2002) combined interviews with tangible data in order to gain a better understanding of how employment affects academic performance. The interviews were quite in depth and covered topics such as why students felt they needed to work, how their workplace benefited them, and the ways in which the college helped working students manage their time and their studies. Though the study sample was again quite small, the depth

of answers reveals specific areas of future research. Watts found that many of the students underestimated the cost of school, not only tuition, but fees and books. The students also seemed to misunderstand how much outside time would be needed to remain successful in a class- that there was more to class than going to lectures and study seminars. However, “the objective evidence did not fully support the students’ perceptions concerning the effects of their paid employment on their academic performance” (p. 74). The students assumed that the work itself had a negative effect on their studies, when perhaps the issue had more to do with organizational skill, what courses were taught, and how often these students sought help.

The current research also demonstrates the struggle students have in balancing employment and academics. Curtis and Shani’s (2002) study revealed that students believed “they would have been able to achieve a better grade on assignments if they had not been working” and the students also admitted to missed classes and failing to hand in assignments because of their employment (p. 133). However, their study also revealed positive effects of general employment, which included an “enhancement of skills and confidence and an increased understanding of how businesses are run” (p. 136). Many of the students surveyed in this study felt that the knowledge gained in their work experience was worth the potential negative effects on their academics.

Another variable in the literature of student success is that of gender. Chee, Pino, and Smith (2005) designed a study to answer the question of how gender might affect academic achievement. They used a survey which contained multiple question areas, such as study habits, time spent on social, work, and academic activities, course selection, alcohol consumption, living arrangements, and extracurricular activities. They found that men and women are different in what affected their academic performance: for men, employment and course load had a negative impact, and for women, it proved to be extracurricular involvement and living arrangements (p. 608).

This study was conducted at a state university of medium size and has yet to be replicated on a larger scale. Completely separately, however, Hunt, Lincoln, and Walker (2004) did a longitudinal study of term-time employment and what is known in the UK as “academic attainment” from 1999-2001. The gender aspect of their study also confirmed that while both genders “suffered academically if they worked longer hours, men were more affected” (p.15). And while gender differences are not the focus of this study, it is a factor to consider while sifting through the data.

In an attempt to promote the development of a theoretical framework to this area of research, Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) suggested that a “psychological transactional approach focusing on both positive and negative outcomes of role interrelationships could be adopted” (p. 235). Their goal was to apply a theoretical framework to “understanding the relationship between employment and university life” (p. 237) and the overall quality of the student experience, which includes satisfaction with academic performance. The importance of their work is that it raises the question of student satisfaction. The financial burden of paying for college can be more stressful than academics; therefore, even if working during college lowers a student’s GPA, perhaps they are still satisfied with their academics because the financial stress has been lessened. The authors have yet to complete their study, but offer up a perspective that had yet not been covered by the literature.

As the body of literature on student success has grown over the years, it is clear that the relationship between student employment and academic achievement is a complex one. A thorough study was completed by Bradley (2006), who aspired to test multiple propositions and factors concerning work participations and academic performance. His five hypotheses were that academic performance suffers for working students, that more working hours equals a worse grade, that specific ranges of hours increase the likelihood of academic success, that there is no simple relationship between employment and

grades, or that there is no relationship between employment and grades (p. 483-484). The data was collected during structured interviews along with a questionnaire. The questionnaire combined sections of open ended answers with questions that rated student perceptions of the relationship between their work and their employment. In working through each proposition, he found that the GPA difference between working and non-working students was not significant, and in fact GPA was highest in two extreme groups: non-workers, and those who worked an excess of twenty hours per week (p. 492). However, the non-working students expressed more satisfaction with their academic performance. All of Bradley’s hypotheses were rejected, but the depth of his study provides more research to be done, most notably in the area of full time students who work more than twenty hours a week. Their academic success surprised him, as those students also tended to miss more class, had little time to attend extra study sessions, reported more work-related stress than their peers, and were less involved on campus. This indicated that there are more variables involved in predicting academic performance than what has been previously explored.

At the same time, Dundes and Marx (2006) came to similar conclusions about how students balance employment during college. Their study confirmed certain data which indicates that a certain range of weekly working hours does not adversely affect academic performance and may in fact increase academic success among working students. The GPA’s were self-reported in this study as a part of the general questionnaire about employment while in college, which was an acknowledged limitation of the study, as students may not have accurate memories of their GPA. The data suggests that the primary factor among the successful working students was study habits. Seventy-five percent of students who worked 10-19 hours a week studied at least 11 hours per week (p. 112). The motivation behind this is unclear- perhaps those students are more organized with their time because of work and class schedules, or perhaps they have more intrinsic motivation to begin with. In this

... it is clear that the relationship between student employment and academic achievement is a complex one.

study, it was clear that students who worked less than 10 hours or more than 20 hours per week did not benefit academically from their jobs. The authors admit that they did not control for on campus versus off campus jobs, which would help in identifying another variable that would influence these outcomes.

A recent trend in the literature explores a wider range of the effects of student employment, most notably the relationship between working and non-working students. Curtis's general survey (2007) included an examination of the perception of students who did not work regarding their peers who did. Those students expressed disagreements with their working peers concerning the negative impact of employment. They implied that students who work "rush assignments, have reduced contribution to group work, miss lectures and are late for lecture" (p. 387). Curtis's was the first study to incorporate the opinions of both working and non-working students and creates a case for taking those effects into account as well. Student employment does not simply affect the individual, but the community also.

Limitations of Current Literature

While there are many studies concerning the varying aspects of academic success, the majority of research does not consider the place of employment and library literature does little to address the academic success of their student employees. Many studies look generally at the hospitality and retail industries as the principal employers of students, as those are the businesses with a lot of available hours, flexibility, and a skill level that only demands minimum wage. The studies that discuss the impact of employment placement take into account internships, or employment that is directly related to a student's area of study or career path. But few have looked at on campus employment versus off campus employment, and none have gone deeper into the variable of place and how that impacts a student's academics.

A meta-analysis of student employment literature was evaluated by Riggert, Boyle, Petroski, Ash, and Perskins (2006). They

reviewed the previous thirty years of research in the area of student employment and higher education. The review critiques changeable definitions across multiple studies, results that are inconsistent with one another, and the lack of theoretical models in this area of research, which explains the inconsistency of the findings. One of the inconsistencies did concern employment and academic performance, about which the conclusions ranged from "students who work have higher GPAs and retention rates than their non-working peers," that GPA "decreased with the number of hours worked," or that "overall there is no negative relationship between student employment and educational performance" (p. 66).

A serious limitation they uncovered in the literature concerns the statistical methodology used to make conclusions. Because the relationship of students to employment is so complex, and there are only so many variables a researcher can control, the artificial groups of students created by researchers can be problematic. "For the most part, studies simply related a variety of independent measures to a rather narrow group of outcome measures. To date, these studies have done little to create a systematic understanding of work and higher education relationships" (p. 67). There is simply no way of being sure that all the factors in the relationship have been identified.

However, despite all the erratic results of the research, the authors promote the continued study of student employment and college retention with an emphasis on academic effects. Because there are so many variables to be researched, "qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory" studies "remain essential in building an information basis for forming rudimentary models" of research (p. 92). They also advocate for smaller studies to be done, as that reduces the statistical problems in combining too many student groups into one study. Smaller studies decrease generalizability but have increased validity in results and can be repeated among institutions, which will result in acceptable, reproducible models for this area of study. This current investigation was aimed at specific limitations found within the literature,

most notably the factor of employment place on various aspects of students' lives and also falls under that category of "qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory" in order to shed light on the impact of employment place.

Description of Research Study

The group of students in the study attends a small, four year liberal arts college in a metropolitan area on the East Coast of the United States. The library has about 100,000 volumes, was fully automated in 2002, is a part of a multi-type library network, and employs an average of thirty five students per semester. Students are encouraged to work in the library for as long as they attend college and are routinely offered opportunities for extended training and responsibility within the library if they choose. This study includes library student employees who are full time (at least 12 credit hours a semester) undergraduate students employed by the college library. The impact of their library position is not being investigated at this time, so the study incorporates those students who work at the front desk, with technology, interlibrary loan, or any other library task.

Library employment is limited in this study to at least five hours of work a week in a college or university library. Academic success was determined by the student's outgoing grade point average (GPA) at the time they no longer attend the college, whether that be because of graduation or withdrawal. A student's cumulative GPA was compared to the cumulative GPA of their peers of the same academic year; also, their incoming SAT scores were used to determine if the library happened to employ students with more potential for success in college regardless of library employment. A survey was also administered to current and former library employees to better understand their perceptions of how library employment affected their academic success.

Procedure and Methodology

There were two sources of data for this study. The quantitative data was based on a report

generated by the campus registrar for library employees from academic years 2004–2008. The report includes gender, major, number of credit hours per semester, and each student's yearly GPA. The registrar also provided information on the average GPA of the student body for each year being studied. The years chosen for the study were limited by an institution-wide database overhaul in 2003, which resulted in complicated data sets that were not as reliable. The number of eligible students for the data set was seventy-six.

The second data sources were the student employees themselves. An online survey was distributed to 45 library employees, current as well as former, which the researcher identified through the library's social networking platform; thirty-one students took the survey. Students were eligible to take the survey if they had completed two semester of library employment. The survey focused on student perceptions of work-related academic benefits during their college career (see Appendix 1). I felt that because the information goal of the survey was student perception, the two groups did not have to align perfectly and that it was more important to get a broad sampling of student employees. Therefore, some of the former employees included in the survey results were not a part of the data set from the registrar's office. The survey was anonymous so the results do not specify between current and former employees.

Results of Research

GPA data

The data from the registrar included seventy-four sets of useable student information. Two students had to be discarded from the total because of incomplete data. The GPAs reported are cumulative unless otherwise noted.

The average GPA of all the library employees in the data was 3.273. The average GPA of the employees who have graduated is 3.349. The comparison by graduating years shows that library employees graduated with a higher GPA than their class average (Figure 1). Also, the graduated library employees

reflected the gender study results cited in the literature review (Chee, Pino, and Smith, 2005) with the female and male averages 3.377 and 3.308, respectively. Incoming SAT scores did not reflect a linear relationship to the cumulative GPA among library employees (Figure 2). Figure 3 indicates the average GPAs determined by discipline. Employees who have graduated averaged a GPA of 3.349; current library employees (two semesters or more work experience) average 3.283. The average GPA of the library employees who had to withdraw from college is 2.80; however, the reason for withdrawal is not specified in the report.

Figure 1

| Year | GPA | Class Average |
|------|------|---------------|
| 2005 | 3.56 | 3.23 |
| 2006 | 3.54 | 3.32 |
| 2007 | 3.24 | 3.18 |
| 2008 | 3.22 | 3.17 |

Figure 2

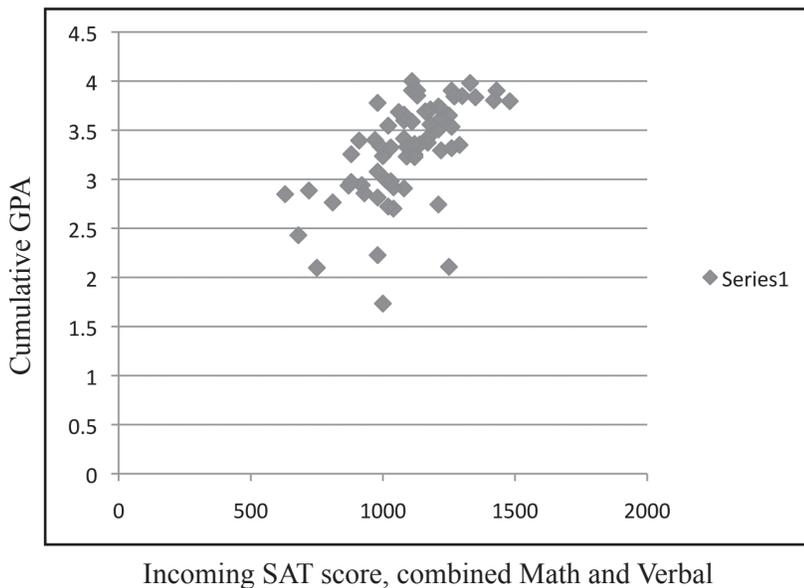


Figure 3

| | |
|------------------------|------|
| History (4) | 3.59 |
| English (4) | 3.54 |
| Music (5) | 3.54 |
| Hard Sciences (BS) (9) | 3.44 |
| Movement Arts (2) | 3.43 |
| Psychology (10) | 3.35 |
| Business (10) | 3.26 |
| Religion (11) | 3.21 |
| Education (7) | 3.10 |
| Social Work (7) | 2.81 |

(does not include Undecided majors or General Studies)

Survey Results

Forty-five surveys were administered to current and former library employees; thirty-one responded to the survey. Sixty-four percent of the students held another job while working at the library and half of that number commented in the optional box. All who commented stated they needed more spending money. Also, Question 2 forced the respondents to rank their reasons for employment in order of importance. Forty-five percent of the respondents rank “tuition payments” as the primary reason for employment, followed by 39% rating “books/school fees” or “extra spending money” as very important. The other options were car payment and a cell phone bill, both of which were rated as not applicable reasons for employment by the vast majority of the respondents. Eighty-two percent felt that working in the library “increased their academic success” while seventeen percent stated that library work had no effect. No respondents felt that working decreased their academic success.

One question on the survey required students to rank the impact of specific aspects of library employment on their academics on a scale of one to six, one being the least impact and six being the greatest. The two aspects that have had the greatest impact on student academics were a relationship with library staff (36%) and

the ability to navigate library databases (32%). Forty-six percent ranked familiarity with the building and resource locations as five (next-to-greatest impact). The two aspects of library employment that had the least impact were study time while on the job (36%) and getting to know other students (42%).

Following the research of Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) who studied overall student satisfaction with their academics and employment, the next question on the survey asked the respondents to answer freely which of those same aspects they found impacted their student satisfaction as a whole. The range included essential, very helpful, moderately helpful, somewhat helpful, or didn't matter. Again, a relationship with library staff and the ability to navigate databases were chosen as essential, with 46% and 48%, respectively. Familiarity with the building and the knowledge of library systems were both rated as very helpful by 39% and 38% of the students.

Discussion of Results

The data from the registrar's office showed a clear distinction between library employees and their peers. Library employees demonstrated a higher average GPA than that of their fellow graduates; the SAT data also illustrated that as incoming freshmen, the majority of the students chosen to work in the library had average SAT scores, which invalidates the argument that libraries tend to employ "smart" students.

The breakdown by academic discipline was a limitation reviewed in much of the general student retention literature because coursework is such a unique variable from semester to semester. Many would assume that students pursuing a Bachelor's of Science in biology or chemistry, for example, would have a more difficult time maintaining a respectable GPA, while holding a job simultaneously. The data from this study reflects the assertion that the variables in the life of a college student are myriad and that one cannot assume direct cause and effect relationships.

The survey included questions regarding motivations for employment, the employee perceptions of academic success, and how employment affected their college experience as a whole. Exploring the motivation behind holding a job seemed necessary to understand the pressures students might face.

The trend throughout the literature review, especially among the studies done in the United Kingdom, was that students initially worked in order to pay for tuition and school fees. As the years have progressed, student lifestyle has been an increasing motivator for employment. Neill, Mulholland, Ross, and Leckey (2004) began their study at a university in Northern Ireland looking at the influence of part time work on post-college job placement. They expected to find more motivation among the students for an increase in job skills, and instead found that "maintenance of a certain lifestyle as the predominant reason" (p. 128) for employment, with 77% of respondents choosing this option, even among outgoing seniors. Clearly, current students perceive increased financial demands, including tuition, but also car expenses, travel home, and school fees. And while the question in the current study about job motivation caused forty-five percent of the students to claim that paying tuition was the primary reason behind holding a job, the open responses as to why 86% of the students held two jobs at once indicated "more spending money" was what they needed.

The forced ranking question concerning all aspects of library employment followed the hypothesis that library employees believe their work to have a great impact on their academic success. The cluster of highest ranking responses confirms that a student's familiarity with the library building, resources, and staff has an important impact on their academics and corresponds to the GPA data; such confidence from library employees about how the library has helped their academic success is reflected in the fact that their GPAs are consistently higher than average.

Library employees demonstrated a higher average GPA than that of their fellow graduates.

The question regarding their overall student satisfaction indicated that the library employees consider their library employment as essential to that satisfaction. A relationship with the professional library staff and the ability to navigate databases proves the hypothesis that again, the knowledge of who to ask for information and where to find it increases a student's confidence in what can be achieved academically.

The open comments at the end were overwhelmingly positive about how the library impacted them as students and in their college life. A sampling of those responses follows, the question being "please add any personal observations you have about the relationship between your employment at Nease Library and your academic achievement":

#14: My employment at Nease Library has given me a greater understanding of the resources available through the library which helped me to achieve academically

#10: I have an upper hand in finding resources for research and in doing so I do better in courses that requires research.

#6: Being able to know how to access materials for research. Just knowing what the Library has to offer to its students is a huge plus. Knowing where the dictionary is and where to find books even if the computer system is down! Knowledge of databases and how to search for a topic (including narrowing down the topic).

#2: My employment helped me academically and socially. I felt it put me a step ahead of my peers; it gave me a grasp and knowledge of databases which allowed me to obtain vital information instantaneously.

When taken together, the results of the GPA data and the survey of library employees support the conclusion that library employment has a positive impact on student academic

achievement. Students enjoy a familiarity of library resources unavailable to their peers, which gives them confidence in their ability to locate reliable information.

Future Research

This research study examines only one library on one campus, but the conclusions drawn have an impact on what future research could be done on this topic. A larger sample of students and an inclusion of an interview, either in addition to or as a follow-up to the survey, would allow for even more in depth understanding of employment motivation. Also, observing more closely the impact of academic discipline on academic achievement as a whole could be discussed. This research was designed to observe if there was a relationship between library employment and academic success and the onclusions drawn are all positive. The question remains as to how impactful that relationship is.

The limitations of this study must be taken in context of the research area. Previous studies and literature reviews have shown that there is a complex relationship between student employment and academic success, which is also sometimes defined as retention. This study is focused on one small factor in that complex relationship. Another limitation is sample size; eighty students over four years cannot outline a trend for working college students. Also, if place of employment is determined to be a factor in student success, then more on-campus workplaces must be studied in order to compare whether the results hold true for all on-campus jobs, or only ones that are more "academic" in nature, such as the library, writing center, or tutoring. Comparing results with other campus departments would be beneficial to answering that question.

Conclusion

The following quote from one of the surveyed students encapsulates the findings of this research:

#7: Working at the library helped me hone my organizational skills, one of the more crucial elements of my socialization in college. It gave me a place and time to get work done when things were slow, and the knowledge of the library itself, the databases, and the online catalog have proven to be invaluable.

Library employees are exposed to a valuable campus resource on a regular basis, and according to the results of this research, they take advantage of that exposure with actual use of library resources. Because of this, one of the benefits of library employment is a higher GPA and an increased satisfaction with student life as a whole. The conclusions of this study ought to encourage current library employees and well as the professional staff. While the employment of students in the library may be viewed by some librarians as frustrating and perhaps not worth the trouble, it is clear that library employment plays a role in student retention and in student confidence as they work their way through college. †

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Appendix 1 - Survey Questions

Opening Page:

This survey questionnaire is for the partial fulfillment of the Master's degree in Library Science from Southern Connecticut State University. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of SCSU for the purposes of completing the required Special Project for the MLS degree. Please be aware that your answers are completely confidential and anonymous unless you identify yourself in some way.

Please answer thoughtfully. Thank you for your time.

1. For how many semesters did you work in the library? (summers will count as a semester)

2. Did you ever hold another job while working at the library?

__Yes

__No

If Yes, please explain _____

3. Please give your reasons for choosing employment during college. (Only check those reasons that apply)

Primary Reason | Very Important | Somewhat Important | 50/50 | N/A

Paying Tuition

School Fees/books

Car payments/ gas

Cell phone bill

Extra spending money

4. How do you feel that working in the library helped you academically?

Increased my success

Had no effect on my academics

Decreased my success

Optional comment _____

5. What aspect of library employment had the most impact on your academics? (forced ranking – type question, greatest to least impact)

Personal relationship with library staff

Personal relationship with library staff

Familiarity with the building and locations of resources

Knowledge of library systems and lingo

Ability to navigate databases

Study time while on the job

Getting to know other students

6. Please rate the influence of the following aspects of library employment on your student satisfaction as a whole.

Personal relationship with library staff

Familiarity with the building and locations of resources

Knowledge of library systems and lingo

Ability to navigate databases

Study time while on the job

Getting to know other students

7. Please add any personal observations you have about the relationship between your employment at Nease Library and your academic life.

8. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this survey. Please be assured that your identity and answers are completely anonymous. If you have any questions, please contact me at erin.mccoy@enc.edu.