

Making federal work-study work

Four steps that one library uses to hire students

by Sherry E. Young

The federal work-study program provides funds to pay for work done by college students who meet certain financial aid qualifications. Campus financial aid personnel use a need-analysis formula, as defined by program guidelines,¹ to calculate student eligibility for participation. Institutions then use their own individualized methods to put eligible students to work. Many of these students go to work in the library to help fill the never-ending needs for student employees.

Scholars frequently criticize the work-study program for some of its outcomes. They argue that the system of federal funding for student jobs fosters discrimination against students who are ineligible for program participation.² Discrimination occurs when departments, in efforts to conserve money, hire students based upon the sources of their paychecks as opposed to their job qualifications. Employers may thus discriminate against well-qualified students who seek part-time campus jobs by hiring less qualified work-study award recipients to avoid departmental funding of student positions.

Critics of the work-study program also charge that its participants often do substandard work. Observers blame this problem on the fact that the system encourages supervisors to employ poorly qualified students who do not possess the abilities to learn properly their jobs. According to this argument, departments may hire unqualified or poorly motivated individuals for work-study posi-

tions 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.³ Similar problems occur when work-study students possess the ability to master the skills they need to do their jobs but cannot do so because their employers fail to teach them those skills.

It has been suggested that institutions of higher learning solve the problems that occur when colleges and universities hire work-study recipients by restricting their employment to areas where poor job performance cannot hamper an institution in its quest to fulfill its mission, and that colleges and universities should ban such students from library work.⁴

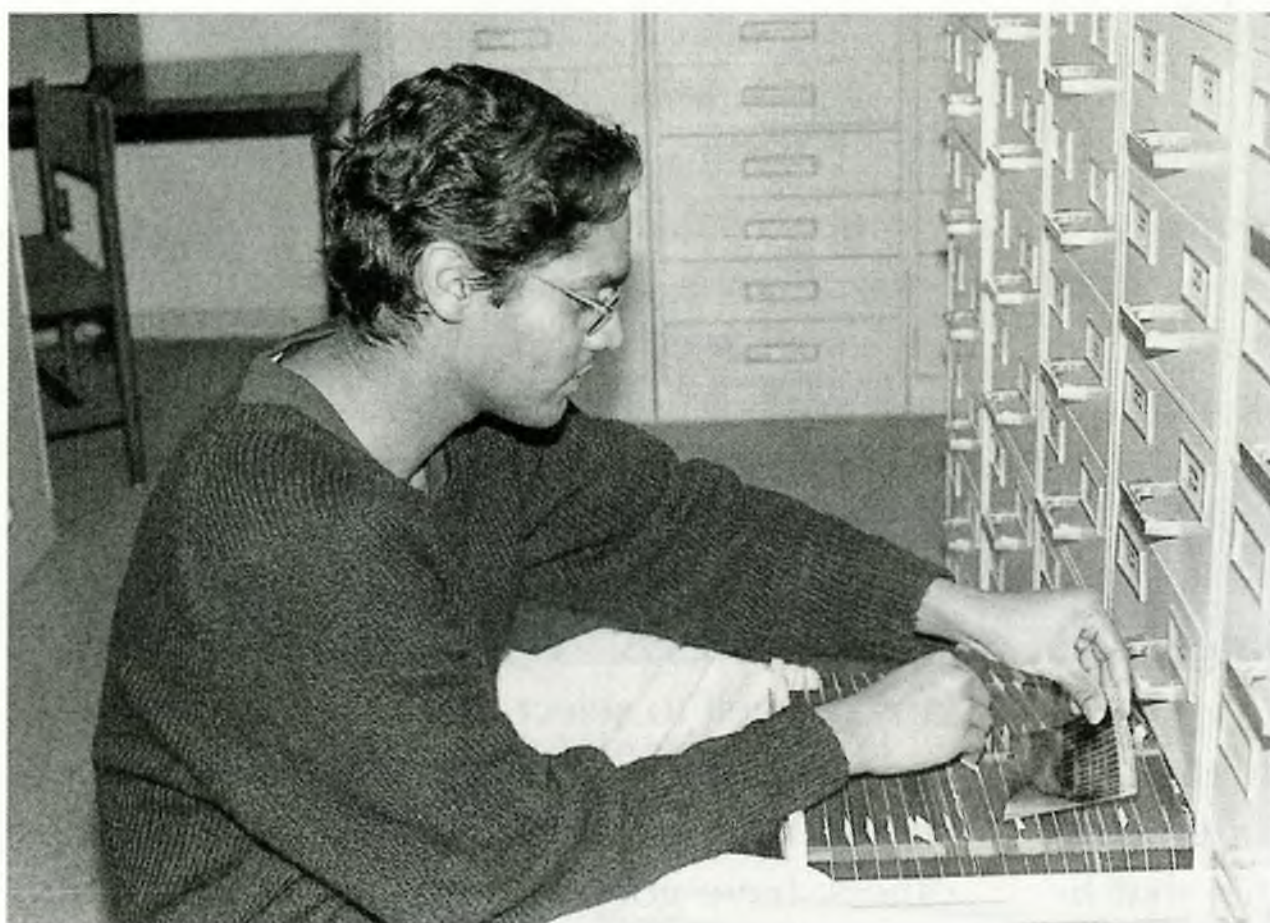
It is possible for librarians to utilize the federal work-study program to maintain or improve library service. They can accomplish this goal by familiarizing themselves with program guidelines, by understanding the problems associated with their implementation, and by working to avoid those problems. By adhering to a few basic guidelines, librarians can eliminate poor student employee performance and make the work-study program work as envisioned by its creators.

Step one: Create jobs that matter

Critics of the work-study program often complain that the program encourages colleges to design "make work" jobs to ensure that

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the maximum number of eligible students receive aid from the federal government.⁵ Administrators who create jobs where no need exists may end up with a bored and apathetic workforce. Similar problems occur when supervisors, who lack the time to adequately train and supervise students to do complex work, assign them simple, repetitious, and boring tasks. Departments that hire students to do unchallenging tasks will face problems associated with poorly motivated workers. Such employees may make careless errors that detrimentally impact a library's ability to fulfill its mission. Thus, librarians should consider carefully both their library's need for student assistance and the availability of supervisors who can adequately train and manage student workers. Administrators may avoid the problems that poorly challenged workers cause by requesting only that number of work-study positions for which genuine need and adequate supervision exists.

Fortunately for librarians who wish to take advantage of the work-study program, the nature of library work encourages the design of substantive student jobs. Library student assistants can do work that is both short- and long-term. They may process and shelve materials or complete special projects. The variety of possible tasks makes it possible for librarians to create jobs with meaningful duties that challenge students to work at their full potential.

Step two: Select applicants with care

Librarians who successfully design substan-

tive work-study positions then face the challenge of hiring only those students who possess the qualifications needed to do the jobs. When hiring work-study awardees for library work, librarians should follow standard procedures designed to gather information needed to make appropriate hiring decisions. They may use completed application forms to check the applicants' ability and desire to follow written directions and to answer questions completely and accurately. Those in charge of making the hiring decisions

should schedule face-to-face interviews with candidates who submit acceptable applications. Interviewers may ask open-ended and fact-finding questions designed to provide information about each candidate's behavior. Librarians may consider asking the better qualified candidates to return for second interviews designed to identify students who are especially interested in library work.

It is an unfortunate fact that some aspects of the work-study program may serve to discourage librarians from following their normal hiring practices. When a limited number of students apply for various campus jobs, supervisors feel pressured into hiring some applicants before considering them in relation to the total group of applicants or before checking their references. Prospective student employees may arrive at the library carrying a slip of paper that requires only a departmental supervisor's signature for approval to hire, thus tempting supervisors to hire work-study applicants before adequately considering their interview results. Hasty hiring decisions may also be made by librarians who believe that rejection of applicants will anger financial aid officers.

Those who employ work-study students can prevent the problems that sometimes occur from hiring students whose employment must be coordinated with an outside department. Librarians who seek well-qualified and motivated student workers should make it policy not to hire work-study applicants on the spot. Supervisors should instead interview applicants, check references, and consider each applicant in relation to the total

group of applicants who applies during any one hiring period. It is true that, by the time the library supervisor completes this process, some of these students will have found jobs elsewhere on campus. If enough applicants accept other jobs, such an outcome may leave the library shorthanded. But this situation is preferable to hiring workers who harm library service by performing their jobs poorly.

Step three: Plan for job training that works

Once the hiring process is complete, the important and time-consuming work of training and supervising begins. It is essential that library supervisors adequately train students for their jobs. To become effective employees, students must know what is expected of them, both in terms of general employment guidelines and in relation to specific job duties. Librarians should make certain that each student has meaningful access to the information he or she needs to succeed as a library student assistant. Because the lack of adequate training may lead to substandard performance, librarians need to plan the nature and composition of student assistant job training. Many college students have held few jobs and have no library experience, and supervisors need to train such students from the basics upward.

Because work-study students usually obtain their aid and apply for jobs at the beginning of the school year, supervisors may find themselves faced with the seemingly overwhelming job of training several new student workers simultaneously. Librarians can meet this challenge by planning for on-the-job training designed to cause as little disruption as possible to daily operations. Supervisors can help work-study students become focused on their jobs by meeting with each one. This is a good time to discuss the library's mission and

to familiarize new student workers with such general matters as time and attendance guidelines. The librarian may take this opportunity to put students at ease by describing the library as an enjoyable place to work and gain job experience. A brief meeting between supervisor and supervised can help workers identify their personal work goals and the library's.

Full-time staff members are often responsible for supervising student assistants. Librarians do well to select carefully those employees who train new student workers. Trainers should be masters of the work they teach to others, have good communication skills, and

take the challenge of teaching seriously. It is important that full-time staff members assigned the duty of training new work-study students have the time to do so. It is illogical to expect those who lack good communication skills, have full daily work schedules, or are unfamiliar with the work that students will do, to succeed in teaching job duties to new student employees.

Step four: Treat all students fairly

Departmental supervisors should employ the same disciplinary procedures for all student employees. The fear that

financial aid officers will look unfavorably upon departments whose supervisors correct the mistakes of work-study employees is not a valid reason for exempting such students from adhering to normal rules of work conduct.⁶ Librarians may wish to make financial aid officers aware of any disciplinary actions the library takes regarding its work-study students so that the officers understand the reasons for the actions. Supervisors cannot afford to overlook the mistakes of any student worker, which, if continued, will compromise library service. Because of its unpleasant (*Federal work-study . . . continued on p. 525*)

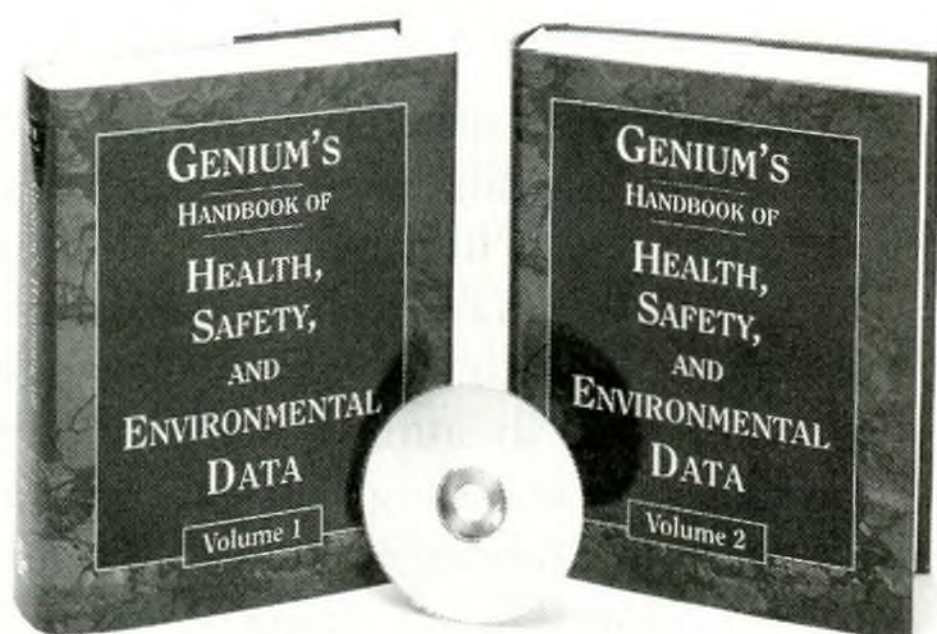


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(Federal work study cont. from page 492)

Fortunately for librarians who wish to take advantage of the work-study program, the nature of library work encourages the design of substantive student jobs.

nature, many supervisors tend to avoid the task of correcting employee mistakes. Although it may be tempting for these individuals to cite fear of complaints to financial aid officers as an excuse not to discipline work-study students, library supervisors should exercise fairness in their supervision of all employees. By doing so, and by keeping open lines of communication with the financial aid office, they prevent complaints from occurring and make those that do occur understandable to others.

Conclusion

Some of the criticism that scholars direct against the outcome of the work-study program is legitimate. Well-qualified and motivated college students may miss on-campus employment opportunities because they fail to meet the financial aid criteria. And, because the federal government pays the wages of work-study students, students may end up with "make-work" jobs designed to put them to work in the absence of any real need to do so. It is also true that supervisors sometimes hire poorly motivated or unqualified individuals who desire financial aid but have no real interest in working.

In spite of these potential problems, it is by following the common sense principles of job design and personnel management that librarians can make the program work as intended. Librarians who follow these commonly accepted principles will provide their departments with student help at little or no cost to the library's budget.

These principles include the creation of meaningful jobs and the practice of appropriate hiring, training, and supervisory techniques. In this time of financial hardships for institutions of higher learning, librarians should view the successful employment of work-study students in libraries as a challenge worth meeting.

Notes

1. Department of Education, *The Federal Student Financial Aid Handbook*, Chapter 7, p. 7.

2. Kenneth C. Petress, "A System in Need of Repair: The College Work Study Program," *College Student Journal* 28, no. 1:116-118.

3. Ibid.

4. Thomas V. DiBacco, "Colleges Should Restrict the Kinds of On-Campus Jobs that Students Are Permitted to Hold," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 8, 1987):38-39.

5. Petress, "A System in Need of Repair," 117.

6. Petress discusses the subject of employers who elect to "endure an ineffective work study student rather than suffer the agony of being placed on the discharging employer list" in "A System in Need of Repair," 118. ■