

Understanding the Integrative Role of an Academic Library for Undergraduate Library Student Workers

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The factors that cause a student to depart will vary from student to student.¹ In prior studies, one such department on campus that has only been examined in an academic integrative context is the university library. The library serves as a nexus for the entire campus population as a meeting place, study space, occasional classroom, and also for some as a workplace. Additionally, the university library, on any campus, often is the largest employer of student workers, a large number of whom often are in student aid programs or work study. Student workers are now a necessary part of an academic library's ability to function effectively.

Student Library Workers

Very little of the library literature examined the library's role in the social integration of the student worker, the library's role in the persistence of the student worker, or the library's role in the learning experiences of the student worker. Library literature has primarily concerned itself with the management and training of students, and the literature has only peripherally been interested in the persistence of student workers academically.² The academic library is a location where interactive experiences can occur

between students, staff, and faculty in the form of a club meeting, study group, or class project.³ But, even more so, the library is a location where interactive experiences can occur in the form of a library student worker employed at one of the many service desks throughout the library.

The academic library has not been examined in a social integrative context despite meeting all the criteria for formal and informal social integration in Tinto's college student persistence model. Furthermore, all of the changes in information-seeking technologies lend the library student workers an advantage they may not be getting in any of their other coursework. The student workers gain a better understanding of the library and current information technology. Therefore, library work is very much a part of student learning.

Student Learning

Today's undergraduate students are busier than ever. Rising tuition costs have forced many students to get part-time or even full-time jobs. At the same time, universities are struggling with attracting and retaining students. Universities and colleges are beginning to think about how to differentiate their institutions

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in order to insure that all students receive valuable learning experiences.⁴ Student learning has increasingly become about finding ways to provide today's students with an educational delivery system that will not only be valuable to the university, but will also provide lifelong learning for all students. Integrating outside learning into the classroom can be an important tool with which to make student learning experiences more active and beneficial.⁵ This literature supports the concept that library work "can help establish crossovers between the academy and the world of work".⁶

Tinto encompassed within his student persistence model that students discover valuable experiences outside the classroom.⁷ However, other studies have shown that students view their learning experiences outside the classroom as equally and, occasionally, more valuable than their experiences in the classroom.⁸ It appears that while information gained in the classroom is still recognizably very important and necessary by students, it is only a small part of the university experience.

Kuh suggested taking outside experiences and integrating them into the classroom in order to create seamless learning.⁹ This involves understanding a student's nonacademic experiences and making them a part of his or her academic world. To a large degree, library student workers benefit from this experience already. Their work in the library is directly related to the majority of their in-class activities, class projects, and class papers. The library is a class resource and opportunity to get "real world" experience and structure. The question begged by Kuh's study and the research question of this study was how the library student workers perceive this opportunity, if at all.

Library Work and the Library Work Environment

As libraries expand services and increasingly more online and electronic library resources are added, the need for extended or additional training is becoming more standard. Simply, there is a decreased need for student workers to shelve books and an increased need in employing tech-

nologically savvy student employees. This is not unexpected since this trend in more online access and support can be easily found in many nonacademic endeavors as well.

The Interviews

The interviewees selected to participate in this study were currently enrolled as undergraduate students. A total of 17 students were interviewed. The participants in this study were identified through a process of purposeful sampling and chain referral sampling, or snowball sampling. This sampling process was chosen because it is considered to be effective in finding and recruiting hidden populations—groups not easily accessible to a researcher through other sampling strategies.¹⁰

The 17 participants came from seven different departments in the library and represented varying levels of public service and technical skills. Aliases were selected for all the participants.

**TABLE 1
The Participants**

Name	Years at Library	Years in College	Current Major	Federal Work Study
Porche	3	4	Biology	Yes
Dierdre	2	3	Psychology	No
Dot	0	0	Nonmajor	No
Marilyn	3	3	Sociology	No
Jack	4	4	Computer Science	No
Butch	1	1	Film	No
Chuck	1	2	Nonmajor	Yes
Ginger	2	3	Communication and Geography	No
Alice	3	4	Child and Family Development	No
Freddy	3	4	Mechanical Engineering	No
Rodger	3	4	Marketing	No
Victor	4	4	Film	No
Hugo	1	3	History	No
Maggie	2	2	Art	No
Jane	3	4	Criminal Justice	Yes
Tina	2	3	English	No
Phyllis	1	2	Kinesiology	Yes

The Study

The research question that guided this study was: How do undergraduate library student workers at an urban, 4-year public institution perceive their work experiences in an academic library contributing to their social and academic integration in college? The researcher was primarily concerned with how undergraduate library student workers at an urban, 4-year public institution perceived their work experiences in an academic library contributing to their social and academic integration in college; however, how the students intellectually conceptualized the library as place and purpose was equally important to the study.

How students think of the library is tangentially related to how the student workers use the library and, perhaps, the reasons why they may have selected library employment. The study explored what their work, academic, and social experiences were in the library. Furthermore, they were queried as to what they perceived as the possible benefits of library employment and if these benefits were recognized prior to employment. It was through these research questions and the application of Tinto's model as a lens that the researcher gained a better understanding of these student workers' perceptions.¹¹

Results of the Study

The findings are presented in three categories. One category is related to the library student workers' perceptions about their work environment and understanding of the library as a place. The second and third categories are related to how their work experiences in the library impact their academic and social integration. These resulting three broad categories are labeled *Conceptualization of the Library*, *Academic Integrative*, and *Social Integrative*.

Conceptualization of the Library

This broad category explored how the participants perceived their work environment. Three specific sub-categories within this category emerged from the students responses: (a) perceptions of coworkers, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) familiarity with library.

a) Perceptions of Coworkers

All the students related positive descriptions of someone who works in a library. Tina stated that someone employed in the library should be "very helpful, polite,

and knowledgeable about the library." Other students emphasized the "helpfulness" aspect. However, several students added that knowledge about the library was also important.

One described a library worker in customer service terms and added that patience was a key quality. She stated that a library worker is "customer service oriented. That's the best way I can term it because they [library employees] have to deal with people." She went on to say that a library worker must be "patient." She explained that "patience is needed if you're going to be interacting with people a lot, or the general public." Another student seemed to echo this thought when he described a library employee as a "calm person."

Only one student mentioned "school oriented" best described the library worker. Surprisingly, though "school flexibility" and "ability to do school work in the library" were comments made by all of the students interviewed in response to potential benefits to working in the library.

b) Job Satisfaction

All of the students seemed to have experienced a high level of job satisfaction and most of their positive experiences centered on successfully helping a library user. A student in library copy services indicated his job satisfaction when he said, "I helped a lady with a ton of copies and showed her how to maximize her copies and save money. That felt pretty good. She was very happy." He went on to say, "The best thing is helping someone save money on their copy job. They are so happy and grateful. It makes you feel good." Like many of the students, he received a degree of or a sense of accomplishment from helping another person with a task. Another student in Media services more clearly explained this when he said that "this job is all about helping people, so there is a positive experience every day. Helping to get someone's computer to work or doing some last minute editing for a video project, it is all positive."

The student workers when asked specifically what the best thing was about their job had similar responses. Most of them indicated that it was convenient to work on campus as opposed to off campus. One student in Government Documents who still had a job off campus in addition to her library job often was "scared" to ask for time off to study at her other off-campus job. All of the students indicated that working in the library was beneficial because of its location

on campus and the “flexibility” of their hours, letting them study when they needed.

Several of the students indicated that knowing “where things were [in the library]” helped them with their school work. Also, all of them mentioned increased technology skills gained by working in the library and that they were constantly updating those skills. One student described this by stating that she thought

that working in the library—the experience itself is just awesome because you’re not dealing with “Do you want fries with that?” That isn’t going to help you after college. The people skills and the professional skills that you pick up working here help you afterwards.

When asked to recall something negative, they all related a negative interaction with a patron who was either frustrated with not finding his or her desired materials or made inappropriate remarks. One student indicated that customer service stress was to be expected to some degree when she said:

Well, I mean sometimes you get [stressed]—I’ve worked customer service before and adults or kids or any age there is always a handful of people that think you’re scum of the earth and they demand everything of you and expect them to still give them, you know, information with a smile.

Difficult patron encounters or “irate patrons” were echoed by all of the student workers; however, a few students also explained their own personal frustration with not being able to help the patron when they really wanted to be helpful. One example of this was stated,

I don’t like telling someone that we can’t help them, so this is a negative... when that happens. For instance, on one occasion, a patron worked really hard on a video project only to find out that we couldn’t export it to a DVD. That was no good.

All of the participants said that they would recommend working in the library to someone for a variety of reasons, such as the “flexible work hours” stated by everyone or “just having all of my life in one place”.

Several students suggested that working in the library “helped them learn about the library” and with her own school projects; Or more succinctly put, “just being here [in the library] makes you want to study.”

c) Familiarity With Library

All the students in various statements indicated that they had benefited in becoming more familiar with the library and their use of the library was fairly homogenous from student to student. All of the students mentioned something that represented a level of demystification of the library for them—that there was a distinct academic and social benefit from working in the library. These benefits of familiarity with the library are revealed though several of the interviewees’ statements.

One student explained that she was “learning a lot of people skills. My computer and technology skills have gone up a lot since I’ve gotten this job. I know lots more movies from taking inventory!” She also believed that she sees “more behind the scenes stuff.” This statement seemed to indicate that the student perceived she had an insider’s look at how a university library operates, and perhaps an advantage over her fellow students. As a result of her employment, she is more informed about the university library than the average student on campus. Another student indicated her familiarity with the library and information seeking skills when she stated that she had “a report. I look up the book on the catalog and I know how to find the book!” This student’s statement reflected a level of mastery that she believed that some others on campus may not have with regards to course assignments. She knows how to locate the information herself without any assistance.

Several students indicated that there was a social orientation to faculty and staff that resulted in networking that benefited him academically. One student stated, “By staying on campus I meet librarians, other students, and professors. Meeting with other students that I have in my classes helps make me study. It is also a great place to make contacts and get together study groups.” He was also more familiar with the physical layout of the library, which for some students could be intimidating because of the size of the building and collection. This student later jokingly explained that “I know where all the study rooms are.” This student had benefited in several ways from becoming familiar with the library. He knew the layout of the library and could easily help facilitate a study group.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned through an increased familiarity with the library was expressed by the student that worked off campus as well. She stated that now she was “not afraid to ask for help [in the library].” She explained that if she was unable to locate a book or not sure where to begin her research, she knew now, as a result of this increased familiarity, where to get help. She will now ask for help where as she might not have before. This is also a very good example of the demystification of the library. The library is not a place to fear and her familiarity with it overcame that fear.

All of the interviewees said at some point that working in the library taught them how to use the library and use the library technology. A few of the interviewees also expressed that they “learned something new” as a result of their employment. They all perceived that there was a direct benefit academically from working in the library. This is best summarized in the statement: “Already having knowledge of the area in case you need to use it for an assignment or research [and] having access to the other areas [in the library] more quickly.” It should also be noted that several of the benefits of being familiar with the library were not strictly academic, but social, like “meeting with other students that I have in my classes helps make me study.”

Academic Integrative

All the participants were asked through a series of differently phrased questions how working in the library had generally benefited them. These questions were asked as a way of gaining further insight into their perceptions of how the library may or may not have played a role in their persistence in college. Those answers that were concerned with attainment of specific educational and institutional goals were categorized as impacting the student’s academic integration to the university. Academic integration is developed through interactions between and among students, faculty, and staff as the library student workers work toward their educational, intellectual, and professional goals. Academic integration for this study is defined generally as the students’ satisfaction with their academic performance and perceived academic success. This category is divided into two sections which follow Tinto’s persistence model of (a) *formal academic integrative* and (b) *informal academic integrative*.¹² Formal academic integrative is defined in this study as academic per-

formance or activities directed to the attainment of specific institutional or educational goals. Informal academic integrative is defined as student, faculty, and staff interactions that take place within the organization but are unrelated to formal or declared educational goals.

a) **Formal Academic Integrative**

Formal academic integrative activities are those that occur in a campus setting which are directly related to the completion of a specific educational objective. It is within the library setting that student activities are often directed to the completion of a specific institutional or academic goal, like a research paper or homework assignment. Several participants indicated that there were a number of school assignments that required or were aided by the use of the academic library. One student specifically indicated two assignments in which she had used the library—where she used government documents from the department she worked in to complete an English assignment and a biology assignment. In the English assignment, she was asked to write on the topic of global warming. Because of the large amount of government information currently published on the subject and her familiarity with the most recent government information that had arrived in the library, she perceived that she had an advantage. She explained, “I had written a paper on global warming and it’s helpful to see the stuff here [in Government Documents], because these are government issues. You see the stuff and read the statistics [on global warming].” She was able to quickly collect the information that would aid her in writing her paper. The other class in biology required her to complete a project and presentation on natural disasters. To complete the project she needed to use the map collection and because the Government Documents Department is responsible for the collection, cataloging, and maintenance of the map collection, she was already familiar with this area. She stated, “And then I had to take a class on natural disasters where I had to use maps and the maps area, so that was helpful.” There was a direct academic benefit from working in the library. Where she indicated that she knew “how to find a book,” she also knew where she could easily access government data and statistics. Furthermore, she applied this knowledge to an assignment.

When asked what academic skills they were learning, one student summarized, “Know[ing] that the li-

brary provides learning tools to students, so use them! Instead of using the internet for all [your] research... books and periodicals are also valuable resources." The students appeared to recognize that learning to be more discerning about their information sources is another benefit of working in the library. Although the student said that books and periodicals were "also valuable resources," which sounded a little secondary to internet resources, yet she did seem to recognize their importance.

b) Informal Academic Integrative

Informal academic integrative activities are those faculty and staff interactions which students may have that take place outside the classroom but take place on campus and are unrelated to declared educational goals.¹³ A student that had developed a mentoring relationship with a librarian had the most striking statement. She explained that the librarian would help her "with her [school] work if [she] needed help... she was like a tutor." She went on to explain, the librarian "taught me the ropes and introduced me to everyone... she's helped me with work if I needed help."

The researcher asked specifically if any of the library student workers had an encounter with one of their class professors in the library. Several students had encounters, one commented that "almost every semester I see one or two of my former professors who come in to place items on [Media] reserve for their classes and check out media items for themselves or their classes." She generally indicted that the encounters were positive and that she would greet the professors "and told them that [she] was in their class." She went on to describe her encounters: "They sometimes asked about the class or grade I got. They sometimes ask what year I'm in and what I'm majoring in. They often recognize my name!" She seemed to take some pride in this—the professors recognizing her name. This speaks to a level of self-efficacy or sense of pride. While these encounters could have happened anywhere, there is certainly more of a chance of them occurring while on campus and employed in the library or campus job.

A student who staffed the Circulation Desk also indicated that she had met one of her professors. "Yeah, I had a positive experience with one of my professors at the [Circulation] desk. He said hello to me and I helped him. He always says 'Hi' [now]." Her statement also reflected a sense of self-efficacy as well and, perhaps for her as a transfer student, it may

be vitally important to her persistence. She indicated that this was her only other "on-campus activity"; for her, library employment may be the only other tie to the campus.

Other students indicated that they saw many of their professors passing through the library. One student in the Media Center stated, "Yeah, sure. They always say 'Hi.'" For her, these passing encounters with teaching faculty in the library were not unexpected or unpleasant. Another student seemed to have a similar attitude about these encounters with his professors; he stated simply, "It was positive and we talked."

Both of these students reported that they had an interaction with their professors, but did not go into detail. One student was a little further along than the other in her degree program, seemed to expect that her professors would always say "Hi." We can infer that these occurrences were reasonably frequent for her to have said, "They always say 'Hi.'" The other student appeared to have had a positive interaction with one of his professors, but with little impact. In both of these cases, the encounters with professors appeared to be expected.

One student, however, went into more detail about one of his encounters with one of his film professors. He was one of the students in the library who worked on some of the more technologically intensive library projects. The library was using his expertise with video and video production to help create some online video tours of the library. A number of students were helping to create these tutorials and short films; he was the one student worker who compiled most of the film footage. The Library Instruction Department was working on making these films into downloadable movies to help orient students to the library. While he was doing some of the filming, he had an encounter with several of his film professors. He related, "When I shoot around the library and have my camera equipment out. I've met a couple of my film professors who just sort of enquire what I'm doing. They asked, 'Why you making a movie here?'" The nature of their conversation was related not only to the library project, but also to his association with the film department and the experience he had using the library's film equipment. He explained,

Usually they come up and drool over the camera and [they] go "Oh, we should get some of

those in our department.” So, a little bit of envy. And they are just curious to see what I’m doing, what my job is here, and it’s easy to say “cool,” and keep going. They are pretty shy people, film professors.

His response was important for several reasons. The first is that he was involved in a project that will benefit him professionally as well as academically. He will have helped create a video project for the library that he can add to his resume. Furthermore, he was using current technology and equipment that he could use in class projects or if he had an assignment that needed him to use these tools. Secondly, there are issues of self-efficacy that are evident by the professor asking about what he was doing and by his noting that they may have been a little envious of the equipment that he was using to work on his project. He then had the opportunity to discuss with his professor about the Film Department purchasing similar equipment.

Social Integrative

This section addresses the answers provided by the interviewees when asked how working in the library had generally benefited them; their reasons were often social in nature rather than academic. Social integrative is defined in this study as informal interactions between students and faculty, between students and staff, and among peers, but also includes the student’s social perceptions.¹⁴ This category is divided into two sections which follow Tinto’s persistence model of (a) *formal social integrative* and (b) *informal social integrative*.¹⁵ Formal social integration in this study is defined as those social interactions and activities that result from being on campus as a part of the formal social structure or resulting from campus-related events. Informal social integration is defined as those socially integrative experiences that are a result of student social choices and interactions not related to an academic experience or depend upon a formal campus structure.

a) Formal Social Integrative

Tinto defined formal social integrative experiences as those social experiences arising out of on-campus employment or extracurricular activities within the college.¹⁶ Interestingly, two of the students sought employment within the library as a result of a formal social integrative experience.

One student was already enrolled in college when the Outreach Librarian came and spoke at his dormitory. He related the following, “[She] came and spoke at my dormitory about the library and she hung around and talked to us afterwards. She encouraged me to apply for a job at the library.” The same librarian also encouraged another female student to apply for a position at the library. She stated,

She [the Outreach Librarian] actually told [my student supervisor] about me and that is how I got my job. I met her the summer before I became a freshman at a Summer Bridge Program. It was like a summer school for incoming freshman where they get to take two classes, live in the dorms before they are a freshman and she ran that program and that is how I know her.

Almost all of the students used the library in formal social integrative ways, either as a place to have a study group or to “make contacts” with other students. One student described her job as “my only ‘extracurricular’ activity.” This is a very important statement, with regards to formal social integrative, because she would have been oriented to the campus as a transfer student from the community college system. Two students were brought into the library by a faculty member and an informal mentor. They were oriented to the university as first-year college students and in Jane’s case as a high school student expected to attend college the next year. This is a very different orientation than the transfer student.

Other formal social integrative uses of the library, like as a place to study with others, were detailed by almost all the students. One student exclaimed that she “practically lives at the library” and it was where she met her friends from class; “You can stay here and be loud. And you can sleep here in between classes.” The student who worked off campus as well sought the library as a refuge, but also it was “really [the] only place to meet and get studying done.” The library was part of both students formal social experience at the university—a place to study and meet and rest in between classes.

b) Informal Social Integrative

Tinto defined informal social integrative experiences as those arising out of the day-to-day activities among differing members of the institution over matters not formally addressed by the college’s rules and regulations.¹⁷ When the participants were asked specifically

about non-school-related use of the library, there were a variety of responses. One student mentioned “hanging out with his friends” in his statement about how he used the library as well as “studying, getting books, holding group study sessions, doing homework, thinking, watching movies, browsing the web, hanging out with friends, and having a quiet place to eat”—but other interviewees also mentioned similar functions and services.

The transfer student stated, “I use it to check books, surf the internet, and rent movies... we [the library] don’t charge like Blockbuster.” Her motivation in mentioning this was an economic one; however, her actual use of the Media Center, as indicated by her reference to Blockbuster, was not an academic one. Because she was a student, she could check out videos and DVDs at the library for recreation.

One student who discovered a love of reading went on to explain, “Well, actually, I read a lot more for pleasure now that I work in the library. I wasn’t really that much into books before.” He indicated that he was using the library much like a public library and that this additional reading was not academic but for personal reasons.

The film major expressed a keen interest in the Media Center. He stated, “Access to the Media Center because I’m very much into movies and music.” Actually, all the students indicated that the Media Center was an important resource for them in terms of checking out movies, listening to music, or using its video editing software. One student who worked in the Media Center explained, “Media stuff, such as videos and CDs, may also be for research or they can be for entertainment.”

Two students mentioned the internet connectivity as their primary and heavy uses of the library. One mentioned that she used the library to keep “checking my e-mail” and the other explained her use of the Reserve Book Room as a refuge and a place to check her e-mail.

A sense of connectivity and belonging was a recurring theme through all of the students’ explanations of why they use the library. One student explained, “I feel more connected to other students. It creates a friendlier atmosphere when people [faculty and other students] get to know you by name.” His remarks are particularly revealing. As a result of working there, he felt more connected to the students, which created a friendlier atmosphere, which is socially integrative

and informal. It was through his interactions with students and student coworkers that he had made new friends and, essentially, carved out his own social niche.

One student best summarized the social integrative aspect of the library as, “One of the reasons that I wanted to work in the library is to feel a part of, more attached to the university.” He wanted to achieve a sense of belonging and indicated that this was one of the reasons for seeking employment in the library. This student was referred to the library by a family friend who may have provided some encouragement to getting a job in the library. All of the students when asked if working in the library made them feel “more connected or socially integrated with the university,” answered “yes.” This informal social integrative aspect of the library simply stated by one student was, “It is fun working here!”

Discussion

All of the students in these interviews all had a positive attitude towards the library. When asked to describe someone who works in a library, they used words such as “polite,” “helpful,” “patient,” and “friendly.” These words appear to convey a sense of pride and self-esteem as a result of this association with library work because they are, after all, describing themselves.

Tinto’s model was used as a guide to analyze the data and refine the categories. Two broad categories of social integrative and academic integrative were created as a result of using this model as a guide; however, an additional category of *Conceptualization of the Library* with the subcategories of *perceptions of coworkers, job satisfaction, and familiarity with library* remained outside of Tinto’s model.

The expected and often explored role of the library in a formal academically integrative sense revealed itself through the use of the library for student worker course assignments. Additionally, participants commented that for school it had been very helpful to work at the library. The informal academic integrative role of the library through interactions between the library staff, faculty, and students also were represented in the students’ comments.

Social integrative roles of the library have not been explored in prior studies, yet we see how in student, staff, and faculty interactions there was an evident social integrative context to these contacts. In some instances, the library was demystified, while a

learning experience occurred for another, and an opportunity for an informal mentorship happened for even another; the library as a framework for social integration into the academic community appeared throughout these interviews. These all contributed and built upon one another to allow for more meaningful social integrative experiences to occur. When the students spoke of their formal social integrative experiences, we got examples of group study sessions and faculty/student interactions which could occur in any academic facility, though the library is more often the best and most likely location for these sorts of activities. However, when the students spoke of their informal social integrative experiences, we were presented with examples of personal use for enhancing family and personal experiences, personal exploration, or merely as a comfortable location for social interaction with one's peers, i.e. "hanging out."

These are the experiences which are the community-building experiences Cuccaro-Alamin and Choy spoke of when they talked about social integration as defined as community membership.¹⁸ The informal integrative experiences are the connections and understandings that are made with students, staff, and faculty outside the classroom that can occur anywhere, but where, perhaps, a unique opportunity for them to happen is created in the library.

Conclusion

There are many different qualities that make the library a unique experience for student workers. The university community and surrounding demographics also influence who the student worker will encounter on the job and shape the mission of the library as well. While the Media Center is important to the student workers at this institution, this may not be true at other institutions. Everything from being primarily a commuter campus, to availability of public transportation, to the number of first-time college attendees will significantly shape the student body's perceptions of that institution. What this study discovered though, more than just the way the academic library may impact undergraduate student workers' persistence in college, was that our best resource in discovering the role the academic library on a college campus and how best to reach out to undergraduate students, in general, may be through better understanding of our own library student workers.

Notes

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