

NURTURING "VALUED WORKERS":
TRAINING, APPRECIATING AND
RETAINING STUDENT EMPLOYEES

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Susan rushed past her supervisor, explaining her 40 minute tardiness to an unscheduled meeting with one of her professors on her research paper. Sharon, Susan's supervisor, shook her head, mumbling that this was the third time in the past two weeks that Susan was late or missed work to meet with her professors. Today's tardiness delayed an important departmental mailing. The chair had already exchanged heated words with Sharon. Sharon angrily tells Susan she can no longer be absent or late for work without notification. Susan sits at her desk fuming that no one told her about the notification policy; didn't her academics come first -- professors keep stupid hours anyway.

Tom who works in a service unit across campus was also mad about his job; mad enough to quit! For the past two weeks, his crew had very little to do. Required to report to work, Tom found he could not use idle time to work on a paper or study. Now it was mid-terms, he had two tests and two papers due; and, wouldn't you know it, enough work to last three weeks. The unit supervisor is requiring all students to work as scheduled, plus accept additional hours. Tom feels he needs the time to study. Dilemma: call in sick or just skip work. Mr. Story doesn't care about me anyway.

Dr. Pits, unit administrator in a student support office, storms out of his office and screams: "I just talked with a very important client who has been disconnected or improperly transferred eight times. These students are incompetent! Get them off the phones and on to a simple task any idiot can do!" Amy, the affable student on the phone desk, can't avoid hearing the tirade. Deflating quickly, she wants to hide. This is only Amy's third day; she had no idea who Dr. Pits was nor had she been trained on the phone system (she was filling in for an absent staff member).

Russ bled green and white! His ideal job would be working in university administration; so he was excited about landing an important student position in administration. After a month on the job, Russ wasn't sure his career plans were so hot. He was beginning to wonder how the university got anything done. It wasn't because he did not have good equipment (a souped up Pentium), supplies, and the ability to do the job. He found himself right in the middle of a war between two directors. Their staffs were split; argued; and undermined each other. The two directors were using Russ to gain an upper-hand over the other. Russ, in no-man's land, headed for the nearest foxhole.

These stories may sound contrived but they have been constructed from comments provided by students when describing their work environments and anecdotal comments from staff about their student employees. Students comprise an integral part of a university's workforce in support of academic and service units. A portion of employed students work as a condition of their financial aide package; others ease the burden on their parents by contributing to tuition and room and board; and for some to earn extra spending money.

Student employees occupy a "unique" position. The positions they hold are often temporary; the students highly transitory. Job tasks play second priority to academics -- at least many students perceive the priorities that way. These characteristics can lead to turnover -- both expected and unexpected -- as student employees are not "vested" in their jobs. Turnover and sporadic absences can, however, cause problems for academic and service units. The challenge for the permanent staff is to find ways to smooth the flow of student employees through their

units and minimize the conflicts between academic and work priorities.

The Student Employment Office (SEO) of Career Services and Placement at MSU serves as the agent for administering on-campus student employment policies and procedures and is seeking ways to assist departments with development of their student workforce. One aspect of the student employment experience is the training and orientation that new employees receive when hired. The university requires that certain materials be shared with students (e.g. hazardous substance and drug-free policies). Beyond this, departments are free to train and orient new student employees in any manner they choose.

Before developing programs and materials for departments, the SEO desired information on these questions:

1. What training do students receive?
2. How effective is this training?
3. What training do student employees wish they had received?
4. What improvements could be made in the work environment to enhance the productivity?

This report summarizes the results from a survey of on-campus student employees that addressed these questions.

FACTS ABOUT STUDENT EMPLOYMENT AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Using complete information from the 1992-93 school year which was available prior to the initiation of this project, the following figures suggest the magnitude of campus employment.

- Approximately 19,043 students were on the payroll during the year.
- Approximately 9,000 - 10,000 students were on the payroll during each two-week pay period.
- Approximately 10,900 students held jobs during one specific pay period when student employment was highest.
- Average hours worked per week was 10 with a maximum of 29 hours allowed.
- Average pay rate was \$4.64.
- Average payroll for one pay period was \$1.2 million dollars.

REASONS FOR TURNOVER AND ABSENTEEISM

A review of articles concerning student employment, particularly those found in The Journal of Student Employment, found six common reasons students either quit their campus jobs or were unenthusiastic about their work, leading to tardiness and absenteeism.

1. Work was unrelated to their academic interests and their career expectations.
2. Most jobs were low skilled (filing, washing dishes), tedious/repetitive, and boring.
3. Required skills the student did not possess. In the 1980's computer literacy was often cited. More recently, students could operate computers, but were not familiar with the software used on the job.
4. Inadequate equipment, primarily computers, required to successfully perform the tasks.

5. Poor training on various dimensions of the job, especially equipment, software, and communication systems.
6. The failure of faculty and staff to extend appreciation for students' efforts and contributions.

APPROACH

A survey was designed that tapped into the training and orientation experiences of student employees. In addition to questions on the amount of training and its effectiveness, respondents were asked questions about their positions (classification, time in position), the importance of being employed, the feedback and recognition received, and their socioeconomic background (ethnic affiliation, gender, age, class standing, work study award). Respondents also had the opportunity to provide written comments on queries into training that was most helpful (least helpful) and what they liked best (least) about their work.

The survey was pre-tested with 25 students in three campus departments. Revisions were made based on this review. The final survey was administered to 2000 on-campus undergraduate employees during the Fall Semester, 1994. Names were randomly selected from approximately 9500 students working during the second week of October. Several surveys (50) were returned, marked as bad addresses. Some students returned their surveys or called and related that they only worked occasionally (e.g. events parking). According to these students, the survey was not appropriate for them. The final adjusted sample was estimated at approximately 1900 students.

Neither a follow-up (reminder) card nor targeted second mailings were attempted because of (1) limit project funds and (2) proximity to Thanksgiving recess and final examinations. This effort was considered exploratory and the results would be framed accordingly. While limited generalization is possible, the main intent of this project was to identify areas where the Student Employment Office could assist departments with retaining their student employees.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Surveys were received from 312 students for a 17% response rate. The responding group was comprised of white (87%), women (72%), primarily from the sophomore class (32%) although all class levels were represented: first year, 21%; juniors, 23%; and seniors, 24%. The students' average age was 24 with a range from 17 to 50 (5 students were older than 25). Finally, 24% of these students received work-study grants as part of their financial aid package.

Since enrolling in the University, 58% of these students had held only one on-campus job. The remaining students had been employed in two (2) to eight (8) jobs; most frequently two -- 30%. On average, they had been in their current positions 46-47 weeks (nearly a year). This figure, however, was influenced by several individuals with very long tenure. The median was actually 14 weeks -- the length of one semester; and the mode was only 8 weeks. Approximately 65 different job classifications were represented in this sample. Collapsing job levels for common titles, the following classifications were the most common:

JOB CLASSIFICATION	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	% OF TOTAL
Kitchen/dining worker	60	19%
Department aide	39	13%
Receptionist	25	8%
Student supervisor	19	6%
Computer assistant	16	5%
Laboratory attendant	16	5%

Their job responsibilities corresponded with these classifications. Two sets of responsibilities dominated: (a) kitchen and dining room services which included help with food preparation, setting up and taking down food service equipment, taking orders and serving food, and cleaning dishes and utensils; and (b) clerical duties related to office operations including typing, data entry, filing, running errands, and answering the telephones. Each of these areas comprised 19% of the respondents. Another common job responsibility was the supervision of other student employees including management duties such as hiring, training and firing -- 7% reported these responsibilities. The remaining responsibilities varied widely though technical maintenance and assistance (computers generally) and dorm security and desk receptionist tasks, accounted for 6% each.

VIEW OF WORK

What importance did these students place on working and what value, besides money, did they derive from their employment? These questions were posed in several formats. Seventy (70) percent of these students felt it was "very" to "extremely important" that they work; only 10% indicated it was "not very" or "somewhat important". On-the-other-hand, only 18% felt that their current job responsibilities were related to their career interests; slightly more than 41% viewed their jobs as "not related at all" to their career interests.

Even though on-campus jobs may not be directly linked to a students career interests, valuable skills/competencies can be acquired that will assist a student later in a job or along a career path. In an open-ended format, students discussed the competencies they gained from their jobs. Excluding the 10% who believed they learned or acquired absolutely nothing of value from their jobs, a variety of competencies were mentioned. However, one area predominated, mentioned by 48% of the respondents: interpersonal relations and customer service -- working with or helping people.

REASONS FOR LEAVING THEIR JOBS

For those students who had held at least two campus jobs, a question was asked to indicate the reason they left their previous jobs. The primary reason was simply that the school year ended

and the student returned home (30% of those answering). Other reasons included tedious/boring work (17%), inflexible/demanding hours (17%), and pay rate (15%). The remaining respondents listed a variety of reasons for quitting, ranging from personal matters, location of employment, unsupportive supervisors, and projects being completed.

All participants were asked to consider the question: "If you left your job tomorrow, what would the primary reason be?" The responses clustered into one major group -- I would leave tomorrow to find a "better job" -- in terms of (1) higher pay; (2) closer relation to academic major and career interests; and (3) better working conditions. Thirty-seven (37) percent of the students provided this answer. Other important reasons included more time for studies; more flexible hours; and less boring/tedious work.

MAJOR REASONS FOR LEAVING A JOB

Reason For Leaving	Percent Responding
Find a better job (Pay rate, related to academic major, better working conditions)	37%
Devote more time to studies	21%
Hours (flexible, more)	17%
Tedious/boring job	14%

ORIENTATION AND JOB TRAINING

Students could potentially engage in a variety of orientation and training opportunities depending on their jobs and their departments or unit protocol for new employees. The University through the Student Employment Office and policy directives have attempted to standardize an initial level of training to ensure that students are informed about selected University policies. Beyond that, training can vary widely, even within a unit. Students were asked to indicate the amount of training they received and then evaluate how effective it was. The effectiveness ratings only applied to those students who had received some level of orientation and training on specific job dimensions.

University Policies and Procedures. The University guarantees students a drug-free workplace, as well an awareness of specific policies with regards to "right-to-know", discrimination, sexual harassment, and handicapper rights. Nearly 50% of the respondents reported receiving no orientation to these policies: students were more likely to be aware of the drug-free workplace policy than the others. The means, based on a 3-point scale (none, some, substantial) suggested only a limited amount of training was received.

Their orientations were not particularly effective in providing an understanding of these policies. Except for the drug-free workplace, the means hovered below the mid-point of the scale. Several areas, "right-to-know" and handicapper policies, were less effectively explained than others.

Table 1. University Policy/Procedures: Training Amount and Effectiveness

University Policies	Amount			Effectiveness				
	Mean	% None	% Some	% Substantial	Mean	% Ineffective	% Somewhat	% Very Effective
Drug Free Workplace	1.66	45	28	15	2.05	19	18	21
Sexual Harassment	1.55	53	24	13	1.92	23	17	18
Right-to-Know	1.69	48	24	19	1.89	26	18	19
Anti-Discrimination	1.63	47	31	13	1.95	22	23	19
Handicapper	1.56	51	19	14	1.88	24	16	17

* Percentages along the row do not total 100% as figures have not been adjusted for those who responded "not applicable".

Department/Unit Orientation and Policies. Initial orientation to the work unit concerned a review of the units' functions and an introduction to the department or unit faculty and staff members. Students (52%) reported receiving a sound overview to the units' functions (major tasks, responsibilities and services) and that this orientation was effective and provided necessary information. Introductions to staff were not always conducted although most students received some information on staff members. Similar to the general orientation, students felt their introductions to staff were somewhat effective.

With regards to specific departmental policies, students felt they received a very sound and effective orientation to payroll procedures and policies on scheduling work hours. Overall students also expressed an understanding of unit dress codes and personal conduct policies, even though 15% to 20% reported receiving no orientation. For those who received an orientation to dress and conduct, the orientation was viewed as effective.

Two policy areas were not adequately covered in orientation according to the students' ratings. Policies and procedures for handling rest breaks and absences were never discussed with 20% to 25% of the students. Those who received training did not consider it very effective.

Job Assignment Training. Supervisors provided substantial orientation for their student employees to job descriptions and job responsibilities. Over 90% of the respondents reported their training as both substantial and effective. Respondents also reported more than "some training" in the location of supplies and equipment. Approximately 75% of these students indicated that they received "somewhat" to "substantial" training on office communication procedures and style. A fifth (20%), however, reported no training in communication practices.

The training in this area was viewed as only "somewhat effective".

Table 2. Department and Unit Orientation and Policies: Training and Effectiveness

	Amount				Effectiveness			
	Mean	% None	% Some	% Substan	Mean	% Inef-fective	% Somewhat	% Very Effective
Dept/Unit Function	2.44	9	36	52	2.41	9	36	47
Intro staff/faculty	2.35	12	38	46	2.35	13	33	46
Policies								
Dress	2.42	13	26	52	2.55	5	26	50
Personal conduct	2.32	19	31	50	2.51	8	25	51
Rest breaks	2.08	24	32	31	2.25	14	30	34
Sickness/absence	2.26	18	33	42	2.34	12	30	41
Payroll	2.46	7	38	52	2.51	7	31	54
Scheduling hours	2.53	8	28	59	2.64	4	25	61

Little attention during orientation was given to performance goals and evaluation processes, however. Performance training was also perceived as only "somewhat effective". While students gained a clear understanding of their job assignments, they were given very little indications of how their work performance would be evaluated or the process that would be used by a supervisor when evaluating them.

Table 3. Job Assignment: Training and Effectiveness

	Amount				Effectiveness			
	Mean	% None	% Somewhat	% Substantial	Mean	% Ineff	% Somewhat	% Very Effec
Job Description	2.50	9	30	57	2.50	8	30	53
Job Responsibilities	2.54	8	28	61	2.54	6	30	56
Performance Goals	2.14	26	29	39	2.28	16	29	39
Performance Evaluation Process	1.86	39	25	27	2.06	25	21	30
Location of Supplies and Equipment	2.45	11	33	54	2.51	9	28	56
Office Communication Styles and Procedures	2.24	20	30	43	2.32	15	27	43

Equipment Training. In a normal work environment, a student could encounter a variety of equipment from telephones to computers. Not all students reported using all the equipment; for example, only 68% of the students handled the unit's telephone system while 28% used laboratory equipment. Training on telephone systems and computer software were provided most frequently. Nevertheless, the mean scores suggested that training time rarely exceeded a minimal amount ("some") with regards to equipment. In most cases, the training received was considered to be "somewhat effective", with better training offered on telephone systems, food preparation equipment, office equipment, and computer software.

Students reported participation in an average of 6 hours of training; the median time, however, was only two hours. In fact, slightly over 21% (64) indicated that they received no training time at all. While 14% received more than 10 hours. Thirty-one (31) percent were trained for approximately one to two hours. In conjunction with their training, 49% were given an orientation guide to the unit and University employment and 49% also reported receiving training manuals for their specific job tasks.

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "student employees receive adequate training for their on-campus jobs", aggregated responses fell nearest the "not sure" option. Fifty-three (53) percent agreed that student training was adequate with 26% disagreeing and the remaining 21% "not sure".

Table 4. Job Related Equipment: Training and Effectiveness

Equipment Training	Amount				Effectiveness			
	Mean	% None	% Some	% Substan	Mean	% Ineff	% Somewhat	% Very Effec
Telephone	2.11	22	17	29	2.30	11	17	29
Office Equipment (copier)	2.03	21	16	23	2.25	13	12	26
Laboratory Equipment	1.86	11	8	8	2.13	6	8	9
Food Preparation Equipment	2.04	11	10	12	2.30	5	9	12
Mechanical Equipment	1.80	11	7	6	2.05	5	8	6
Computer: Hardware	2.04	16	16	18	2.22	10	13	20
Computer: Software	2.10	15	15	20	2.25	10	12	21

From comments provided to open-ended questions on training provided, several categories emerged as most helpful:

- Learning their job responsibilities by hands-on-training -- learning by doing.
- Learning by observing others (including video demonstrations) and instruction (including information packets)
- Mentoring from co-workers
- Knowledge of policies, regulations, and procedures
- Knowledge on use and maintenance of equipment and supplies (e.g. chemicals)
- One-on-one training from supervisors or co-workers
- Tour of facilities and work areas
- Knowing the expected job performance levels

Respondents also had the opportunity to indicate the type of training they wished they had received but did not get. While the comments were not as extensive as the helpful comments, over 200 respondents offered suggestions. Their suggestions grouped primarily into four areas:

- Provide new employees with clear job expectations, including specifics on dress codes, break and vacation policies, and job performance evaluations.
- Conduct tours of work areas (department/unit) and introduce new employee to all staff and faculty (especially).
- Inform new employees about policies and procedures for handling materials and situations related to the work environment.
- Provide more training on the computer software to be used.

A common complaint among faculty and staff who supervise student employees concerned frequent student absences attributed to (1) study for tests and completion of academic assignments; (2) meetings with faculty and advisors; and (3) conflicts with extracurricular activities. These same activities often caused students to report late for work. Students, on-the-other-hand, had elected to work on-campus because of the flexibility in work schedule and perceived empathy among employers for academic-related priorities over work. When questioned about how often their academics and campus activities interfered with work, students tended to indicate that conflicts rarely existed. Having to decline work to study was the highest rated reason for missing work, but it was only cited as "very seldom" interfering with work responsibilities.

Table 5. Reasons for Work Conflicts

Conflicts	Mean	% Fairly to Very Often
Studying	1.84	5
Extracurricular Activities	1.55	2
Meeting Advisor/Faculty	1.41	1
Late for Work	1.66	4

A final set of questions queried students on their satisfaction with their current jobs and their work environments. In general, students were "fairly satisfied" with their jobs (mean = 3.4 on a 5 point Likert scale) with 52% "very" to "extremely satisfied". Approximately 20% were "not satisfied" to "somewhat satisfied".

In response to the question on "what aspects of your work environment do you like best", students offered approximately 440 comments (two comment categories per student) which were categorized into several generic groups. One area clearly dominated: the friendly interpersonal work environment (51% of the comments). Students enjoyed a friendly, personable environment ("good teamwork") which was directed toward helping other people with whom they had direct contact. Another important aspect of their work environment was the flexibility provided (20%) in terms of dress code, being able to study during slow periods, and scheduling hours. Less frequently mentioned were the type of work (independent as well as easy to do), attitude of supervisors (supportive and appreciative of students), physical environment (location convenient, safe), and non-monetary benefits (gained responsibilities, career related, operated equipment).

Table 6. Summary: "Best Aspects of Work Environment"

Aspects	Number of Comments	% Total
Friendly/Personable	225	51
Flexibility	85	20
Type of Work	45	10
Supervisor Attitudes	28	6
Non-Monetary Benefits	27	6
Physical Environment	25	6
Pay	7	2

Students also provided comments on what they liked *least* about their work environment. While only 330 comments were received (two comments per student), the list contained more varied and often specific ("don't like treatment of animals") comments. Aside from the 35 comments that indicated "no negative aspects", the responses clustered into seven categories. A large number of the comments were directed toward the attitude of supervisors (including faculty and graduate assistants) which were described as disrespectful and unappreciative toward student employees. Also captured in this category was the hostility and bad feelings between co-workers with students caught in the middle. Consistent through these comments were negative feelings toward staff who were perceived as using student employees for their own gain, students reported that staff generally only communicated these attitudes in negative tones to students.

The second area cited was the type of work the students were assigned. Most students found their work tedious with long slow periods which could not be filled with studying or other activities. Some students did not like specific job tasks (washing dishes) and there was a small

group (15) who found their jobs to be pressured with deadlines and lots of people ("unhappy") waiting to be served.

Other areas that were liked least about work environments and reported were poor physical work environment (unsafe, poorly maintained and old equipment), poorly defined policies and procedures (unclear work expectations), scheduling hours (inflexible), pay (inequitable for doing same tasks), and impersonal (no interactions).

Table 7. Summary: "Worst Aspects of Work Environment"

Aspects	Number of Comments	% of Total
Attitudes of Staff	106	37
Type of Work	77	27
Physical Environment	43	15
Scheduling Hours	24	8
Pay	18	6
Policies/Procedures	12	4
Impersonal	13	5

A central theme that ran through student comments to various questions concerned feedback on their work performance and the recognition they received for their contributions. Three questions tapped into these concerns. The first two dealt with job performance feedback: how frequently was feedback received and was feedback important to the successful completion of one's job responsibilities? Students indicated that they "occasionally" received feedback with 15% indicating "never" and 25% "very seldom". Yet, feedback was considered to be "fairly important" to the success of a job with 48% indicating that feedback was "very to extremely" important.

Being recognized for their contributions occurred less than occasionally for 72% of these responses. The remaining 28% received recognition "fairly" to "very often". This finding was consistent with the written comments on feeling unappreciated for their efforts.

Table 8. Student Perceptions on Feedback and Recognition

	Mean			
Receive Feedback	2.89	% Never-Seldom 40	% Occasionally 28	% Fairly - Very Often 32
Importance of Feedback	3.29	% Not-Somewhat 28	% Fairly 24	% Very - Extremely 48
Receive Recognition	2.80	% Never - Seldom 42	% Occasionally 30	% Fairly - Very Often 28

SUGGESTIONS

These findings are not too different from other studies on student turnover. Overall students receive some training that prepares them for their jobs. However, additional training and orientation on selected topics might enhance the students' work performance and enjoyment for their jobs.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- Review all university policies, even though some policies may not directly affect student employees.

DEPARTMENT

- Introduce students to all staff, including faculty, and share some biographical information to encourage ("team") membership into the unit.
- Provide clear policies, practices, and procedures on:
 1. When and where to take rest breaks
 2. Handling excused and unexcused absences
 3. Scheduling hours

JOB TRAINING

- Establish clearly defined performance expectations.
- Explain how a student's performance will be evaluated.
- Provide examples of unit communication procedures and preferred styles.

EQUIPMENT

- Mentor students during their introduction to unit software, particularly if the software is not commonly used in the public domain.
- Review and practice telephone courtesy and procedures, especially unique features of the telephone system (transferring calls, voice mail).

Students are an integral component of the university's workforce. Beyond providing adequate training and orientation, staff and faculty need to go further when communicating the basics for promoting a work environment in which our students will be productive. This means:

- Emphasizing the value the student's job contributes to the unit's service to its clients, even if the job is routine.
- Setting reasonable, but high expectations.
- Providing opportunities for gaining skills and demonstrating achievement.
- Showing daily appreciation for student efforts (beyond the annual student appreciation day).
- Communicating with students (develop a relationship) that invites them to be members of the unit.