Creating Connections: Engaging Student Library Employees through Experiential Learning

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Creating Connections: Engaging Student Library Employees through Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are finding that involving student employees in collaborative projects fosters student development while increasing library capability and impact. This article validates and builds on Denda and Hunter’s team-based engagement framework. The authors expound on that model with principles of experiential learning that apply to a broad scope of student library work. They demonstrate this approach through creative project examples, including the exhibit “Connection.” Engaging student library employees through workplace experiential learning connects them to people and purpose, fostering skill development and a service mindset for their library roles and future careers.

Employing students in academic libraries serves a dual purpose of facilitating library services while augmenting student education through practical work experience. Libraries that treat student employees as students to develop and mentor, and more than a workforce to manage in accomplishing library operations, realize numerous mutual benefits. Academic libraries are realizing these benefits by offering student employees opportunities to engage in work experiences that transcend traditional task-oriented library duties and student to librarian relationships (Denda & Hunter, 2016; Mestre & Lecrone, 2015). This approach helps library employment become more than just a good campus job, but also a stimulating experiential learning environment.

Experiential learning in the library workplace can benefit not only LIS students and others inclined to careers in libraries, but any student, including undergraduates pursuing disparate careers who make up most of the student personnel. While some of these may be turned on to a library career by a positive work experience in the library, most will not (see Maxey-Harris et al., 2010). That does not represent a problem but is another kind of opportunity for both the students and the library. Regardless of student career choices, library jobs can help them obtain relevant qualifications while leveraging...
their diverse talents to enrich library services. Libraries maximize the benefits when they invest in engagement and development for all their student employees.

Library jobs do not constitute experiential learning by default. In general, students in library jobs fulfill routine tasks, lacking context for the bigger picture of the projects they work on and having limited engagement with librarians (Denda & Hunter, 2016). With inadequate vision of the library’s purpose and the overall patron experience, their interaction with patrons tends to be more transactional than relational (see Decker et al., 2017). Their work ethic leans toward efficiency more than effectiveness in meeting patron needs. Moreover, they may see limited application of their library work experience to their education and career. This is particularly true of undergraduates, most of whom are not pursuing a career in libraries.

Overcoming these challenges to build an environment for workplace experiential learning takes intentional design and creative effort.

A useful method for implementing experiential learning for student employees in academic libraries is Denda and Hunter’s (2016) team-based engagement framework. Experiences with student employees in the Religion and Family History section of Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library, validate and magnify this model. This article expounds on the model in the broader context of experiential learning and demonstrates the model’s wider application in the library workplace from creative projects to creative approaches to other student responsibilities. This holistic approach also elucidates additional benefits of experiential student employee engagement.

The highlight of the creative project examples in this study is the interactive exhibit Connection. This collaboration with student employees and other efforts had many benefits for the library as well as for the students’ development. When libraries engage student employees in workplace experiential learning opportunities, students become more connected to people and to a sense of purpose while developing skills and a service mindset for their library roles and their personal and career development.

**Literature review**

This article is an affirmative response to, and extension of Denda and Hunter’s (2016) team-based engagement model for student employees in academic libraries. Through an oral history project example, they provided a framework for libraries to engage student employees and library science interns in projects that develop their skills for the 21st century while building communities and expanding library impact. The framework is grounded in principles of inclusion and nonhierarchical leadership and learning. Student employees share responsibility in collaborative projects that transcend task-oriented roles and connect them to a diverse community of participants. Librarians facilitate these efforts in a mentoring rather than a traditional supervisory role. The model values unique student perspectives and ideas which help inform project development and outcomes.

In their research, Denda and Hunter identified a gap in the literature regarding undergraduate student employee contributions in libraries, noting that “rarely [have] undergraduate students played a significant role in projects” (p. 257). They observed that much of the literature focused on performance issues in hiring and training...
undergraduates to fulfill typical functions. They called for more libraries to acknowledge the potential for expanded contributions by undergraduates and to offer opportunities, training, and mentoring for a richer and more meaningful library work experience. Their work is a significant contribution toward filling the gap. In addition to demonstrating the value of involving undergraduate workers in collaborative projects, they provided a model for other libraries to follow. They noted, however, that more research is needed to validate the model’s impact, and to see whether it works beyond students hired for a dedicated project, but also for those who are in more traditional task-oriented library roles.

Others have written about increasing engagement of student library workers. Maxey-Harris et al. (2010) urged libraries to engage student workers through mentoring and offering more variety in their library responsibilities. Their focus was on attracting more students into the library profession, but such engagement is worthwhile for students pursuing non-library careers as well. York et al. (2010) discussed the benefits of providing opportunities in the library for students through service internships. They involved unpaid student interns in a variety of projects focused on extending the classroom experience. Kelly et al. (2014) provided several examples of ways libraries can involve undergraduate interns in experiential learning that also benefits the library. Interns contributed to various efforts including creative efforts, such as developing a lib-guide, creating a database tutorial, and curating an exhibit, as well as marketing and research while building skills, not just for potential library careers, but for other fields as well. The library benefited from unique student talents and perspectives and by creating library ambassadors. They mentioned that experienced student employees could do similar projects if library budgets and the constraints of their primary job responsibilities would allow it. Stevenson and Hannaford (2019) discussed the application of workplace-integrated-learning in academic libraries, using 21st century skills and core competencies to frame the experience. Their efforts were focused on graduate interns in LIS and related fields.

Much of the literature reflects undergraduate student employees doing routine library work and LIS and undergraduate interns being engaged in more dynamic, creative projects. Mestre and Lecrone (2015), however, showed that engaging work experiences need not be limited to interns or to other students in project-based roles. They can also be extended to undergraduates employed in traditional roles in circulation, reference, and collection maintenance. They gave opportunities for student leads to train and supervise their peers in these roles and involved them in creative projects such as displays, exhibits, and training videos. They also modeled the use of formal methods to gather feedback from student employees and other library staff on these experiences. These extra responsibilities elevated student work experience beyond routine duties, helping them to develop skills and feel more motivated and engaged in meaningful work. The library enjoyed reciprocal benefits of a more engaged student workforce.

Mitola et al. (2018) conducted a thorough review of the literature to discover the extent to which student employment in academic libraries aligns with the characteristics of High-Impact Practices for education defined by Kuh (2008)—practices that also align with experiential learning. They found that library employment consistently meets two characteristics: requiring significant time and effort of students and providing extended
faculty and peer interaction, albeit they said more research is needed to assess the quality of each. However, their research indicated gaps in other characteristics. They suggested that libraries can improve the student work experience by fostering greater diversity, providing better feedback, offering more training and mentoring in transferable skills, and connecting their library experiences to the broader context of their education and career. They found that much of the literature on student employment is focused on improving library productivity and not enough on library employment as a means of contributing to student success. “We must shift away from treating student success as a byproduct of the work we need students to do and rather treat it as a core element of their employment” (p. 362). Libraries, they argued, should intentionally focus on aligning student employment with best practices for educational success.

Expounding the model

Envisioned for students working in academic libraries, the team-based engagement model entails a collaborative approach, where students share responsibility for project development and implementation supported by a community of librarians, support staff, and other contributors. The relationship of the librarian to the students is not hierarchical. Rather, the librarian is a facilitator who oversees the project, provides guidance and direction, creates intentional connections between the students and other contributors, and empowers the students with the flexibility to share ideas and innovate. An effective project experience is one where differences are valued, and students and librarians contribute their unique abilities and perspectives to learn from each other. Students also participate in continuous evaluation to improve the project processes and outcomes. A good project is meaningful to the community and has practical application (Denda & Hunter, 2016).

Denda and Hunter (2016) found that the model benefits both libraries and their student employees. The library benefits from having a more engaged student workforce and by maximizing their contributions to projects through their unique skills and perspectives. The students benefit by developing their knowledge and technical skills, teamwork, and relationships. Such projects help students to focus on “ways to be instead of tasks to accomplish” (p. 261). The benefits to the project include a richer project experience that is a learning experience for the participants and a boon to the project quality and impact.

This model fits well into the larger context of experiential learning. Developed by Kolb (1984) experiential learning is “an engaged learning process whereby students learn by doing and by reflecting on the experience” (Boston University Center for Teaching & Learning, 2017). Key elements include intentional design of authentic learning experiences with natural consequences, student initiative and accountability, student engagement on multiple levels (intellectual, creative, emotional, social, & physical) and reflection through critical analysis and synthesis (Boston University Center for Teaching & Learning, 2017).

Experiential learning has been a major emphasis at Brigham Young University (BYU) under President Kevin J. Worthen. BYU is a large private religious institution with an emphasis on undergraduate education. The Office of Experiential Learning, opened in
2018, seeks to expand such opportunities for students while developing faculty and staff capability to facilitate these experiences. BYU has stressed three key elements in the experiential learning cycle: intention, integration, and reflection. Intention entails planning experiences with purpose and a process aimed at specific learning outcomes. Integration means engaging students in applying knowledge to experience while continuously evaluating the experience in relation to the intent. Reflection involves formally articulating what was learned and how the learning experience went (BYU Office of Experiential Learning, 2019). As part of a broader BYU initiative known as *inspiring learning*, the aim is to provide an environment that both inspires students to learn while offering learning opportunities that lead to inspiration (Worthen, 2016, 2020).

Experiential learning is not achieved merely by offering students a series of experiences or activities. Purposeful design is vital to integrating the experiences with intended learning outcomes (Roberts, 2019). Reflection is key to constructing meaning from the experience and applying it to new experiences (Peterson, 2019). When experiences are authentic, with real-world application, uncertainty, and the risk of failure, students are more engaged and learn better (Roberts, 2019). Quality learning experiences are also relationship rich (Worthen, 2020), helping students to connect to a variety of contributors, influencers, and stakeholders through teamwork and collaboration (Roberts, 2019).

Mapping the team-based engagement model to these experiential learning principles looks like this (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team-based engagement model*</th>
<th>Experiential learning elements**</th>
<th>Experiential learning cycle***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intention</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Design and Planning)</td>
<td>Designed learning experiences</td>
<td>Purpose and forethought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide guidelines &amp; direction</td>
<td>Chosen for learning potential</td>
<td>Specific learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create intentional conditions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Defined process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for students</td>
<td>(Engagement: intellectual, creative, emotional, social, &amp; physical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Engagement: Active participation, inspiring learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Experiential Learning Activities)</td>
<td>Application of knowledge to real world, with natural consequences</td>
<td>Relationship-rich experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engagement: involve students</td>
<td>(Initiative, decision-making, &amp; accountability)</td>
<td>Application of knowledge to experience, with risk &amp; uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to make unique contributions</td>
<td>Question, investigate, and experiment throughout</td>
<td>Assuming responsibility, with intent to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Team-based, collaborative, inclusive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Regularly evaluate learning vs intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meaningful projects, practical application</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student responsibility &amp; input, empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Continuous evaluation of the project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection</strong></td>
<td>Critical analysis</td>
<td>Articulate what was learned and how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Formal and Informal Assessment)</td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Use a formal process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gather student perspectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * (Denda & Hunter, 2016); ** (Boston University Center for Teaching & Learning, 2017); *** (BYU Office of Experiential Learning, 2019). The intention, integration, and reflection categorizations are based on the experiential learning cycle as taught at BYU.
Libraries can turn student employment into a high-impact practice by implementing this model. When applied with intentionality, integration, and reflection, the model compares well to the characteristics of high-impact education practices defined by Kuh (2008) and contextualized for libraries by Mitola et al. (2018). The model fosters quality faculty and peer interaction while making good use of student time and effort. It opens students to more opportunities to connect with people with diverse experiences. It delivers formal and informal feedback through continuous evaluation and reflection on the experience. And it connects students to a broader community perspective while developing transferrable skills that can be applied to other contexts.

The model also helps fulfill the Big Six college experiences identified by Gallup as key contributors to life preparedness and well-being after college (Seymour & Lopez, 2015). Those experiences include the support of at least one faculty member who excites them about learning, cares about them as a person, and mentors and encourages them. The Big Six also includes experiential learning opportunities such as a project that takes a semester or longer to complete, a job or internship that has application to classroom learning, and extracurricular activities and organizations. Library projects and other work experiences that apply this model can satisfy all these factors of a meaningful college experience.

While employment in the library may naturally contribute to learning through job experience, learning will be greatly enhanced by following the experiential learning principles of this model. Various elements could be further explored and expanded. For example, much more could be said about principles of effective planning, project management, or of formal assessment. However, this is not intended to be a comprehensive checklist of every project management best-practice, but a summary of key elements of effective student engagement.

Expounding the model is not meant to imply that it is incomplete, but to reinforce the model and further articulate it in light of these principles of experiential learning. All the elements are in the original model, but perhaps these comparisons will help with comprehension and application. Mapping this framework to the experiential learning principles of intention, integration, and reflection can also bring the associated elements of the model into sharper focus. The hope is to increase awareness of the model and promote its wider application in academic libraries.

Additional benefits to this model can be seen when viewed in the wider library context. There is opportunity to expand the benefits beyond individual projects to broader library efforts and the overall patron experience. The model not only applies to students hired for a dedicated project, but to those who work on projects along with regular library responsibilities. It can apply to the projects they work on as well as to their work that is not project-based. It provides opportunities to participate in creative efforts and to apply creative approaches to other work. In addition to the skills they develop, students can become more connected to the people they serve and gain a service mindset. In catching the vision for a worthwhile project, they can also grasp the purpose of the library as a whole. In addition to skill building, this connection to people and purpose will serve them well in their future careers, whatever they may be.

The keys to realizing these larger benefits is to approach them with intention and to reflect broadly on the experience. This means letting the students know from the outset that the experience is about more than the immediate project or other effort in itself,
but to share a vision of how it fits in to the larger context of the library’s and university’s mission and the student’s overall development. Reflecting broadly means not only reviewing the outcomes for the project, but also the outcomes for the library, the university, and most importantly, the student. It means reviewing what they achieved and what they learned as well as also how they felt about the experience and how it may translate to other experiences.

The connection exhibit

An opportunity to apply this expounded team-based engagement model came during the production of Connection, a creative and interactive family history exhibit by the BYU Family History Library, a unit of Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library in the Religion and Family History section. The library is a hub of campus activity with 2–3 million gate counts per year (BYU Library, 2020). On-campus employment has long been a university priority to assist students financially and provide job experience. In 2019, the library employed 196 students, fourteen of which were in the Religion and Family History section and participated with the exhibit creation. The faculty subject librarian for Family History and the reference supervisor for the section were the exhibit curators.

The impetus for involving students in the production came primarily from the experiential learning emphasis at BYU. More important than the assistance that students could provide with project tasks was the opportunity to engage them in an activity that would meet an information need while also contributing to their learning. While deepening their engagement and building their skills, the project could also connect them more with the patrons and with their library team and purpose. This was an opportunity to build on recent training for the reference area on a shared customer service vision which includes helping patrons to become inspired.

The project began with the intention to collaborate with the student employees at every stage, including designing, building, and hosting. The curators shared an overall vision for the exhibit experience intended for patrons, but not a fully articulated design and project plan, as that was not yet defined, and needed their input. What started as broad brushstrokes developed into concrete plans through dialog with the student employees.

The Religion and Family History section of the library is located down an exceptionally long hallway on a basement level, lined by white walls that are plain except for the occasional static art display or science poster session. This was a chance to liven up the space with an interactive experience to engage students and other library patrons. The idea was to engage patrons in a tactile way to discover connections to family history from various perspectives. There were a few seed ideas for interactive elements, based on things seen at previous family history events, which the team could adapt into a cohesively themed exhibit experience. The exhibit project began without so much as a title, let alone defined elements or a specific plan for creating them. But the team had the essential concept, a rough budget figure, two librarians and some student employees, and the faith that it would succeed.
With this common vision in mind, students had the task to come up with ideas for interactive exhibit elements. The curators gave some broad parameters, conveying a sense of the feelings to evoke such as inspiration, belonging, and fun with considerations about the nature of the available space, then let them brainstorm. Excited by the chance to work on an exhibit and inspired by the creative and interactive scope of it, they came up with several new ideas while helping adapt and refine initial ideas. As Swanick et al. (2015) observed, “the intellectual route to a completed exhibition is never a straight line” (p. 20). This was certainly true in the development of the Connection exhibit.

Together the team came up with eighteen distinct exhibit elements, which could be tied together with a theme of connection—to family past and present, and to each other as a global family, hence the exhibit title. Besides some narrative story and other interpretive content, the exhibit consisted mostly of analog (non-digital) experiences encouraging patron participation. For example, a large poster of an old letter included the prompt, “If you could say anything to one of your ancestors, what would it be?” where patrons could share their message on a colorful post-it note. Another experience was a large world map where patrons could identify ancestral homes with colored pins. There was an array of old to new technology used for family history, from a manual typewriter you could type on, to a vintage microfilm reader with newspaper stories, to a large touch screen with interactive family history apps. A life-sized tree decal adorned with five generations of the university president’s family history invited participants to use their phone or a provided tablet to see whether they were related. The highlight of the exhibit was a massive three-dimensional representation of DNA with colorful labels for genetic traits like hair and eye color and geographic origin, where people could wind colored yarn around the characteristics that described them.

The interactive nature of the exhibit would provide tangible and visible evidence of the level of engagement, adding an extra element of authenticity to the project as well as the risk of uncertainty. If the ideas were designed well, there would be evidence in the number of messages, pins, strands of yarn, etc. If they failed, the exhibit would look rather sad. The insight of the student employees into the perspectives of student patrons was invaluable in ensuring that the exhibit experiences would resonate with the primary audience.

Student employees carried significant creative and project execution responsibility and were empowered to fulfill their roles. Each had an assignment to take charge of one or two exhibit elements with responsibility to complete the design and construction and report back on milestones. The project timeframe and deadlines were sufficiently extended to allow for students to fulfill all their regular reference duties while working on this creative project during downtime with some limited additional hours allowed as needed beyond their regularly scheduled assignments. One of them had the assignment of student project lead, to assist in keeping the overall project on track with a cohesive design and coordinated plan. The students also had the opportunity to lead on other aspects of the project, including designing the exhibit branding colors and fonts, and various print and digital media marketing materials. While overseeing the project and facilitating student efforts, the curators also took charge of some of the exhibit elements directly, with student assistance.
The project was an opportunity for the students to apply their knowledge, experience, and talents while learning new things. All undergraduates, the students included eleven from the reference staff, two research assistants, and a web assistant. Responsibilities were assigned to leverage student strengths and adjusted as students manifested previously undiscovered strengths. A history major helped gather and edit family history stories and testimonials. A family history major did the research on the university president’s genealogy, and on the historiography of family history presented in a book of remembrance. An instructional design student designed an infographic for using family history apps on a phone or tablet. Talented contributions did not necessarily align with chosen majors. A poet majoring in English had the graphic design skills for the main poster and digital advertising design. The history major turned out to have aptitude for project management, a curatorial eye for layout, and a knack for cutting foamboard, and thus became the student project lead.

The *Connection* exhibit was a relationship rich experience. The students worked together on their assignments, seeking and providing feedback to one another and the curators on the various project aspects. The curators also facilitated numerous connections for the students to work in partnership with other library employees and volunteers who could help them by contributing content, resources, and specialized skills. The collaborative nature of the project and process of continuous reflection and iteration cultivated deeper relationships among the students and their librarian supervisors. The curators gratefully acknowledge the significant contributions made by the students to the exhibit, without whom it would not have been possible, as well as the contributions of other library colleagues who participated in the collaboration.

The design and construction process were iterative, with ongoing evaluation and feedback to continuously improve as the project progressed. This often required “back to the drawing board” moments to address logistical issues through design changes and ensure that the interactive elements would function as intended while also creating the desired impressions. Students communicated with each other and the curators frequently to review drafts of text and prototypes of exhibit components, troubleshoot problems and collaboratively identify creative solutions. In doing so, they experienced some failure and the opportunity to learn from that and find other approaches that worked. The result was an exhibit that not only looked esthetically pleasing and conveyed the desired messages, but also worked well from a practical standpoint in terms of the layout of the space, intuitiveness of the activity prompts, and the durability of the interactive elements.

The exhibit final product was very well received by library patrons and staff. It ran for two and a half months, generating significant engagement during the slower summer period and the busy beginning of the Fall semester. Of the interactions that were measurable, at least 1,900 individual interactions were tallied. The message an ancestor prompt generated 278 responses alone and there were over 200 entries made with the typewriter. More pins had to be purchased and post-its, yarn, and typewriter paper refreshed. Patrons were frequently observed reading the narrative displays and interacting with other elements such as the microfilm reader, which could not be measured. The daily observation was that hardly anyone would walk down the hallway without stopping to look at some part of the exhibit or to interact with it.
The exhibit garnered many positive comments from patrons and library staff and collected numerous verbatim comments in a reflection jar at the end of the exhibit. More than one librarian said it the best thing they had ever seen on display in that hallway. More than one library team enjoyed the exhibit and shared their collective experiences. One even used it as an impromptu team-building exercise for their full time and student employees during their staff meeting. Besides many compliments given verbally at the reference desk, patrons left numerous written verbatim comments. One patron said, "I love this exhibit! It got me thinking how to express family history in new ways!" Another said, "I felt like my world view was expanded as I thought about the past and where I come from, as well as the diversity of where others come from." The core message of the exhibit was reflected in comments like, "Love the feeling of connection!" and "It's cool to realize how we're all connected." For some, it touched an emotional chord. "I wept as I read some of the notes people wrote to their ancestors," wrote one patron. Patron feedback included students, faculty, and the general public. The Connection exhibit was something that the librarians and students involved were universally proud of. It brought smiles to the creators’ faces each time one walked the long hall to this section of the library.

**Student reflection**

Reflection is a key component of the experiential learning process. When student employees are asked to reflect on their experiences, they recognize more fully what they have achieved and learned, and how to leverage that for the future. In addition, ongoing reflection allows for course correction in projects and the awareness necessary to more fully incorporate the knowledge gained. Teachers use formative (ongoing) and summative (final) assessments to help their students in the learning process, improve their teaching, and gauge how much has been learned. In a similar manner, library facilitators and mentors can invite student reflection through formative and summative assessment to improve projects and make learning stick. As student employees engage in a project, it is best to have them to reflect on what they are learning and creating. This will help them assess the product and their development throughout the experience. After the project is complete, having them submit a formal reflection piece with questions will allow them to ponder the value of the experience and the impact it had on them. Open-ended questions will help them think of skills developed, perspective gained, relationships strengthened, and other impacts. This summative reflection will offer them a final opportunity to review their role in the project and help them carry what they learned into the future, with their work in the library and beyond.

The formative reflection for the Creation exhibit was informal, taking place mostly through impromptu exchanges at the reference desk and in librarian’s offices, in discussions in staff meetings, occasional ad-hoc meetings, and emails. Curators, as facilitators, checked in with the students often, asking them how things were going, whether they needed anything, and to solicit feedback and ideas. Students also raised questions and gave input as needed. They knew there was an open door for dialog about the project.

The summative reflection piece for the exhibit was administered via a Google form to each student employee who contributed. The questions were as follows:
1. In what ways did you contribute to the family history exhibit (specific ideas, tasks, role)?
2. What skills did you learn or hone through work on the project?
3. Tell us about how it affected your view of your job.
4. How did working on the project affect your ability to do your other work?
5. Would you like to participate in similar projects in the future? Why or why not?
6. Would you recommend other student employees to participate in a project like this? Why or why not?
7. Did working on this project help you in your future career? Or do you think it will? Please explain.
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the experience?

This might have been a longer feedback piece than necessary, but the responses were also used as qualitative data to demonstrate the value of experiential learning in library student employment. Some of the employees had graduated and moved on from the area, but everyone still responded.

The responses clarified their feelings about the experience and what they took away from it. Some technical skills they said they learned were graphic design, Photoshop, and printing. A few mentioned learning exhibit design, layout, and construction. They also identified soft skills they developed, including research, writing, time management and teamwork. One person commented, “I am a perfectionist and like to have things go my way. Working with so many talented people forced me to accept that other people were dependable, capable, and had good ideas.”

The students overwhelmingly responded that it favorably impacted their view of their job. Most viewed it as exciting and fun and helped with their outlook of the job. One mentioned the stress and tedium at the end of the project but said it was worth it for how much patrons enjoyed the exhibit. Everyone said that the project did not interfere with their normal tasks for work. Patrons were always the priority and they had sufficient time to work on this project when it was slow. One mentioned that it helped them to prioritize better.

All student employees said they would want to participate in a project like this again and would recommend it to other student employees. Some were particularly emphatic. One commented, “It gives you an experience that is daunting but so rewarding in the end when you look at the amount of time and energy put into it.” Another said she would recommend it because “it gives student employees the opportunity to pursue a topic/project they are genuinely interested in and make it their own. Doing so brings out a greater passion and excitement for work. Plus, it is a really great feeling to see your work displayed.” Many of the students were able to feel a greater sense of accomplishment from participating in the project.

Every respondent but one said that this project would help them in their future career. One mentioned bringing it up in job interviews as evidence for her project management skills. It was directly related to the future desired work of another employee. Another student, an elementary education major, noted that it will help her with making presentations of high quality for her future students. Another student will be using the material she researched to add to a paper she is coauthoring.
Students also provide some feedback that help improve the experience for future projects. One student expressed frustration that changes were made to requirements after work had been done and suggested that things be settled at the outset to avoid rework. This indicated that the curators needed to do a better job of setting expectations about uncertainty and risk. It was a learning opportunity that was missed, with this student, at least, which will be addressed in the next section.

Overall, the responses from this reflective survey were overwhelmingly positive. Student employees found value in the experience noted many benefits, including learning and honing skills. Their responses reflected increased confidence in their abilities and a greater connection to the purpose of their work and the people they work with and serve.

**Making connections**

The benefits to be gained by the students and the library from integrating experiential learning opportunities into normal library work are numerous. This section discusses the benefits in the context of the *Connection* exhibit project as well as other library projects that utilized the engagement model.

A large benefit to the library is the improved vision and attitude that student employees feel toward their job and consequently, the patrons. One student commented, “When I was working on the inspirational stories part of the exhibit, I got to see how family history is life changing. This helped me take greater pride and responsibility in my job and how I helped patrons with their own family history.” The work on the exhibit had a transformative effect as it reinforced the why of the regular job and helped connect the students to the library section’s mission and values. Students had recently been trained on customer service and vision with emphasis on the need to smile, be friendly, and show interest in patrons, but training on customer service is more effective when the purpose is internalized by the student employees. After the exhibit, the customer service in the area improved because the student employees had a higher level of understanding and cared more about their work.

Another example of the benefits of connecting students to purpose through better engagement came in a protracted collection maintenance project to process 75,000 newly acquired family history microfilms. It was long, tedious work, and the student employees had a hard time enjoying it. As the students became aware of the purpose of adding those films, that they represented not merely collection items, but millions of names that would help patrons with their research, the students were more motivated, and the work was less of a chore. They became even more engaged as approach changed from fulfilling prescribed tasks, to inviting their input on process improvements, giving them leadership responsibilities, and implementing many of their creative ideas to save money, time, and effort. The students came to enjoy working on the project as a collaborative team experience.

Arguably the most important benefit to integrating experiential learning is that student employees learn valuable skills that will help them in their future careers. The 21st century skills of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information and technology literacy, flexibility and more (see Denda & Hunter, 2016) are all
strengthened by mentored experiential learning. These skills undoubtedly will make these students more marketable for future careers. This was corroborated by an employee who said she used the exhibit experience in a successful job interview after graduation. All others who worked on the exhibit project for more than a few weeks said it would definitely help them in future careers. A student mentioned that she “honed [her] problem solving skills using creativity, working within a budget, and working with a team to get a large project done.” The students mentioned these skills and others in their feedback and curators witnessed the development of these skills throughout the project.

In the same vein, developing such skills helps students in their current position at the library, which for most of the students is primarily front-line reference service. Staff with improved critical thinking, communication, and information literacy will be better at reference and consequently will give superior help to the university and student body. These skills are amplified as students are given significant responsibility and empowered to take initiative and lead. The student lead for the Connection exhibit grew in her leadership abilities and commented, “I learned during the exhibit how to help others complete their work and problem solve. I was able to use those skills in other parts of my job to help motivate and help those I worked with.” In addition to the overall student lead, each student was accountable to lead on their assigned part of the exhibit, with the curators delegating creative control while facilitating student success, and they all gained leadership experience and responsibility.

In another large project a student research assistant was assigned as lead over researching links between two family history databases. In addition to her own research contributions, she supervised the work of other students and volunteers, created video and printed training materials, and conducted quality control. The results were shared via an email campaign that helped hundreds of thousands of people connect to their ancestors. The student’s contributions were highlighted in a related news article. She has shared on social media about how much she loves her job. It has strengthened her leadership, communication, and collaboration skills, experience that continues to benefit this ongoing project and which she can take into her future career.

Along with the soft skills, the technical skills students develop through experiential learning have practical application. Students learned graphic and 3D design and construction skills while building the exhibit which have also come in handy since. Other student employees have been assigned to help with the marketing for family history services, working on ad campaigns and social media outreach. They have learned about marketing and advertising strategies and gained experience with Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and web media platforms. One of the students was an advertising major and this will directly help her with her career goals. In another microfilm project, a student with aptitude for Excel applied his skills with macros to optimize a spreadsheet, saving a lot of worktime. He built on knowledge he obtained from the classroom and took initiative to research new information to strengthen his technical and problem-solving skills. He overcame roadblocks with grit and Google. Such skills also have immediate and ongoing practical benefits for the library and these students.

Experiential learning work assignments allow student employees the chance to discover and build on their strengths, and to better leverage them in their work. A student
who contributed to the exhibit said, “I loved being able learn so many new skills and strengthen other skills I had in this unique work opportunity.” Another commented, “Besides specific skills that I learned or developed, I think that this project helped me to mesh together in new ways skills I already had.”

The application of their prior knowledge to this integrated experience with risk, responsibility, and teamwork, brought out the best in the students and built on their strengths. Several students were involved in designing the esthetic and marketing materials for the exhibit. They each had strengths of creativity and graphic design, but they had to work together to build a final product that pleased the group. They refined their creative process, technical skills, and collaboration throughout the project.

The risk and uncertainty of such projects can be challenging, as indicated by the frustration about change expressed by one of the students on the exhibit project. Indeed, change mid-project can be difficult and frustrating, however such change is also vital to creative projects. An authentic experience includes uncertainty and risk, where ideas may fail, and efforts need to be retried. Such is everyday work in the real world. Having the flexibility to iterate based on new creative input from all sides generally results in a better result than when teams adhere strictly to an original plan. A lesson for facilitators is to communicate this principle up front, so that students expect change and recognize the benefits to be gained from it. They will likely still find such conditions challenging, but if facilitators do a good job of conveying the intent and showing the application, they will hopefully consider the tradeoff to be worthwhile. This ability to cope with risk and uncertainty may be one of the most important ways that workplace experiential learning prepares students for future careers, but one must be intentional about it or they could miss this learning opportunity.

Another improvement to this experience would have been to make better use of formative assessments during the project. The summative reflection survey at the completion of the exhibit was highly valuable, but the formative assessments were less focused. Though frequent, ad hoc discussions on ways to improve the exhibit were good, more intentional focus on learning objectives mid-project would have improved the value of the experience for the students. It would have helped them see the skills they were building and their application more clearly during the experience. It would also have helped to identify the concern about change sooner and validate and offer perspective. Stevenson and Hannaford (2019) discussed developing core competencies through learning agendas referenced frequently throughout the workplace-integrated-learning experience and noted that students will appreciate “the mindful approach to their professional growth” (p. 239). Also, if there is not consistent assessment during the process, there is a risk of disengagement or employees misunderstanding objectives and deviating from the central purpose.

Another student commented, “I really enjoyed this project, though it was very stressful towards the end. It lasted a long time and we had to work on it for several months. It became monotonous and tedious, but it was so nice once it was done.” This perspective was shared by many. Nevertheless, this was also a valuable part of the learning process. Most worthwhile endeavors are difficult and at times, monotonous, but teaching student employees to pull through is a critical skill and will improve their resilience and work ethic.
Experiential learning projects push student employees beyond what they believe they can achieve. Overcoming feelings of uncertainty and other challenges to achieve success builds confidence. This happens as students assume greater responsibility and become engaged in finding solutions to problems. As they see the superior results of their efforts, they gain conviction to apply themselves in future efforts. This was evident in the exhibit and other examples above. In another project, two students were tasked with developing an escape room for some outreach events, when they had never made one, or even experienced one. The students got to work and pushed through the challenge through research and collaboration. They had other students test it and provide feedback. They made an incredible product through their creativity and determination. This helped them grow in confidence and have more job satisfaction.

The student employees’ confidence blossomed as they worked on these projects because of the trust and responsibility placed on them. Responsibility and trust are intrinsic elements in the integration phase of the engagement model. Belief in them was manifest as librarians listened to their opinions, placed them in charge, and treated them as equal partners. Their supervisors knew they could accomplish great things and they felt that support and with it, they were able to flourish. One commented in the feedback survey, “Thank you so much for believing in me to produce something that I was proud of and something that impacted other people.” A couple of other students commented on an improved ability to speak up and voice their opinion. One student said, “I think it has helped me be more confident in what I have to contribute to my workplace and responsibilities. I am more inclined to speak up and share my ideas because I have had such a positive experience with it in the past.” The importance of confidence and articulateness in employees cannot be overstated. The unique perspective and ideas of all need to be heard to improve libraries and all workplaces.

In a different exhibit project, an undergraduate research assistant was given an opportunity to help in the design and content research. She made this comment about her experience:

I was able to be part of the planning committee for the exhibit and that was a really validating experience. [The librarian] brought me in to listen and participate, even though I really wasn’t qualified or on par with the other people on the committee. I feel like that was something that helped me view myself as a worthwhile contributor, even in an area [where] I didn’t have much expertise. It really set the tone for the rest of my work experience with [the librarian], and, I think, has made a difference in other areas of my life as well.

The confidence engendered by experiential learning translates into other areas. A positive collaborative project experience helps students feel they can voice concerns and ideas more freely in other areas. This was evident for example in the collection maintenance projects for microfilm, where students felt empowered to contribute valuable feedback and innovative ideas that changed the workflow and saved many hours. Experiential learning produces more confidence as the students see their ideas valued and used to produce something worthwhile and better because of their voice.

Experiential learning makes for happier student employees. Having autonomy and accomplishing things, or self-actualization, is of paramount importance in a job environment. Being a library student employee can feel disheartening as it is an entry level job and generally has a large portion of tedious tasks. By incorporating experiential
learning principles into the work and showing the students that their satisfaction in the current job and their prospects for the future matter, they have been happier at work. They have felt more of an investment in their job and a renewed commitment to even the tedious work.

Being able to collaborate and connect to coworkers through experiential learning opportunities also brings unity and satisfaction. One of the student research assistants who participated with the reference students on the exhibit commented, “I enjoyed getting to know the help desk students! It was fun to be able to come into the area and be able to say hi to them and feel more welcome.” There is an increased camaraderie as a result of collaborative projects, and this has created a beneficial cohesion to the library area. That sense of community includes library volunteers with whom the students worked on some projects, especially the exhibit. It involves other library colleagues who have collaborated with the students in various ways. This feeling of connectedness also extends to the library as a whole and to its diverse patrons, as student employees find a higher purpose in their work through deeper engagement.

**Conclusion**

The academic library is much more than a repository of resources that facilitates classroom learning but is itself an extension of the classroom. In addition to course-integrated library instruction, student mentoring in research, service-learning opportunities, and other proactive efforts, libraries can augment classroom learning by treating the library as a workplace experiential learning environment. The team-based engagement model is an effective approach to student development, with lasting benefits to the student as well as the library. With intention, integration, and reflection, academic libraries can turn student jobs into high impact educational experiences.

This article adds to the body of literature affirming that undergraduate student employees in traditional library roles can successfully participate in projects and other experiential learning activities. Doing so will be worthwhile for the sake of contributing to student learning alone, but also has net benefits for library operations. It is recommended that libraries staff to allow a portion of time to be spent on projects and provide at least nominal budgets to facilitate such projects. That said, with creative use of downtime and existing budgets, much can be accomplished when librarians are actively seeking for ways to leverage student jobs into workplace learning opportunities. While doing so also requires time for librarians to facilitate and mentor, it will be time well invested, resulting in better engagement and richer relationships among student employees, their supervisors, and the library patrons. The principles of the engagement model can also be applied to the more routine assignments of student employees, yielding further benefits.

To be meaningful and effective, experiential learning efforts should be integrated with the library’s purpose as well as the students’ development needs. Authentic experiences have real-world application. There is work enough to do in the library and ample opportunities for improving the patron experience, that projects and other activities need never be make-work endeavors. With creative thinking and intentional design, learning activities can always be designed to help fulfill information needs of library
patrons while achieving student development goals. The principles of the engagement model may be applied holistically to a variety of projects as well as to more routine student library duties.

Reflection is key, not only to assess projects and their outcomes, but more importantly, the student experience—what they felt as well as what they learned from the process. Reflection on experiences that follow the principles of the engagement model will enable students to connect to people and to a higher sense of purpose for their future benefit as well as for the library.

Notes
1. This experience was inspired by Rita E. Cortez, a managing director in BYU’s Language Flagship program, who used it for a Day of the Dead family history activity for students and gave permission to use the idea.
2. This experience was inspired by a similar one created by FamilySearch for RootsTech 2019, where the personal traits were represented like fruit on a grove of trees resembling the RootsTech logo.

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References


