Warren Wilson College Library New TiLTS Project Final Report

**From Assembly Line to Craft Shop: Reorganizing Student Workers
in Technical Services at Warren Wilson College**

Goals

While most academic libraries use student workers, Warren Wilson College is
unusual in two respects. First, our college has a mandatory work program in which
all students, regardless of financial need, aptitude, or interest, are required to work
on one of over 100 work crews on campus. Second, unlike many college libraries,
which select their student workers, our library is assigned 20 to 24 students, mostly
first-year students, by the Work Program Office. Our library is in competition to
retain our student workers, who often prefer crews that take them outdoors, require
physical activity, allow them social interaction, and complement their career goals.
The library has experienced very low retention rates of student workers, unlike other
college libraries, where student workers remain in place throughout most of their
academic careers.

In our library, technical services comprises two departments: acquisitions/collection
development and cataloging. We depend on student workers to serve
paraprofessional functions, but the vast majority of the tasks in both departments is
detail oriented and repetitive, which often cause the typical eighteen-year-old to
perceive them as tedious and unsatisfying. Prior to the project, the turnover rate
among our student workers was almost 100 percent each year, or even each
semester. This situation presented tremendous challenges as we invested heavily
in repeated training and depended on a highly inexperienced student crew, whose
skill level and commitment were low.

In the past, the five to seven student workers in technical services were assigned to
the cataloging or acquisitions departments, where they performed tasks specific to
the operations of that department. There was little crossover in student jobs
between the departments, and as a result, few of our students understood or
appreciated the big picture of what went on in technical services.

The goals of the New TiLTS project were to address these issues (high turnover,
low skill, low commitment, and job fragmentation) by creating a learning as well as a
production environment. We wanted to develop a crew of more committed and
more-skilled student workers. We wanted to move away from the assembly-line
model of work toward a craft shop model, where each worker is responsible for an
item from the time it is received from a vendor to the time it is shelved and ready for
patron use.

Strategies

New Workflow

We combined the cataloging and acquisitions crews to form a new technical services crew. This integration created a more seamless work experience, so that work flowed more fluidly between the two departments and student workers were able to see the interconnectedness of the processes in technical services as well as the value of their work to the library as a whole. Combining the crews also provided a larger array of work. One of the students, who had worked in the acquisitions department before the integration observed, "I like cataloging and acquisitions being in the same department now. It gives a great deal more variety to my day."

Integrating our crews enabled us to redesign and streamline the workflow between the departments. The two librarians have enjoyed the increased opportunity to collaborate and consult with each other. Our new workflow is outlined in Appendix 1.

New Procedures

Each worker is now responsible for an item from the time it is received from a vendor to the time it is shelved and ready for patron use. Each item is marked with a color-coded flag (e.g., yellow flags for student A, green for student B) as it proceeds through the process on specially marked book trucks, purchased with New TiLTS grant monies. When the item is ready, the student initials the bar code and stamps the date due slip with a message such as "Prepared by (name)." At various points in the process, the two librarians provide quality control checks and feedback to the student workers and track and post errors on a white board, also purchased with New TiLTS funds. This system has built accountability, ownership, and pride, and resulted in higher-quality work, enhanced worker satisfaction, and improved retention rate, as indicated in our assessment below.

Training

We provided three kinds of skill training:
1. Basic skills, which enabled students to perform the daily and routine work in technical services, such as materials handling and processing. These included bar coding, security stripping, assigning Cutter numbers, applying plastic jackets and spine reinforcements, call number labeling, stamping, and catalog checking.
2. Advanced skills, which were taught to everyone in technical services but were performed only occasionally. Although not everyone had the opportunity to apply these skills on the job, they were useful skills and we wanted everyone in technical services to have at least a basic knowledge of these areas. Examples of advanced skills included book mending, basic HTML or Web authoring, working with vendors, and working with invoices and budgets.
3. Value-added skills, which were perks we offered everyone who worked with us. These skills were useful for finding information for the students'

research and coursework and for lifelong learning. Value-added skills included power searching on our local SIRSI catalog, advanced searching on WorldCat, finding articles in magazines and journals, and evaluating the quality of information retrieved.

We developed a syllabus for teaching these three types of skills and gave exercises and tests to measure the effectiveness of our training program. See the section on Assessment for a discussion. Certificates of completion, which were awarded to students who completed their training in the basic skills, were well received and gave the students a sense of accomplishment.

We offered frequent refreshments and small gifts as incentives and morale boosters, funded in part by the New TiLTS grant. At the end of the fall semester, we had a holiday party and are planning an end-of-semester celebration.

Assessment

Error Tracking

We developed a chart for monitoring the numbers and types of errors, so that we could provide more relevant feedback to our student workers and identify areas where further training might be needed. The error-tracking chart, posted on a board purchased with New TiLTS grant funds, is summarized below:

Month and Year	No. of Errors
September 2004	52
October 2004	26
November 2004	37
December 2004	23

See Appendix 2 for the complete chart, which records errors made by the students during the processing of an average of 270 items each month.

By the end of September 2004, the students had completed basic skill training. Their higher skill level is reflected in the smaller number of errors in October. Although the number or errors increased in November, much of this increase is attributable to an individual student who was experiencing academic and personal difficulties and who dropped out of Warren Wilson College at the end of the semester.

Accomplishments

The error chart caused some of our students to feel that we placed undue emphasis on errors over their growing competence. So, in the spring semester, we changed our focus from errors to special accomplishments. We feel that this approach emphasizes positive reinforcements for our skilled crew by recognizing extraordinary group and individual work behaviors. We also provided a category for students to report their own accomplishments and problems (see Appendix

3). To share a sense of progress, we posted monthly statistics on the number of items added. Both charts were well received. One student wrote that the accomplishment chart was "awesome."

Training

On the whole, the students scored well on the exercises and tests. They appreciated the basic and advanced training we provided because they saw the relevance of these skills to their daily tasks. To our surprise, however, some of them expressed negative opinions about the academic "feel" of the exercises and tests in a work setting. This opinion was exacerbated by the perception that students in other departments of the library were not required to meet these expectations. Overall, the value-added skills we intended as a perk for our crew were not well received by the first-year students who constituted the majority of our crew. One of the reasons was their perception that our training duplicated other library instruction sessions required as part of their first year seminars.

Work Program Evaluations

At the end of the fall semester, the librarians completed a work performance evaluation for each student. In these evaluations, we confirmed that all our students had a good understanding of what needed to be done and that they could work fairly independently by the end of the first semester.

The students completed work program supervisor evaluations of the librarians. In their evaluations, the students indicated that they wanted more positive reinforcements and more frequent recognition of their achievements. However, we found inconsistencies and contradictions in these evaluations. Because the evaluations have been completed only once, cumulative and comparative data are not yet available. The forms used for these evaluations were the same for all work crews on campus and were not specifically geared toward the library setting. They did not address issues we were most concerned to emphasize.

Writing Prompts

More useful to us were the periodic writing prompts we administered. So far, our students have completed eight of these brief pieces, in which they shared with us their opinions and suggestions on a variety of matters. These prompts enabled us to take the pulse of our student workers and provided timely feedback that guided us in making corrections or adjustments as necessary.

The students' responses to the first prompt clearly indicated their initial confusion at the beginning of the New TiLTS project. One wrote, "I feel rather as though I've been thrown headfirst into the book processing. I have no feel for the overall sequence or process, which makes things a bit difficult." By the second prompt, however, they had achieved a clearer understanding of the workflow and job expectations. One of the students noted about her learning, "I've come to understand the Dewey Decimal System in far more depth than I thought possible. I've also learned a lot about searching for books, which will be helpful

with projects." In early October, the students requested that they be allowed to listen to music as they worked, a request that we granted after establishing some guidelines. In the fifth writing prompt, they told us that they appreciated having the music and they felt the guidelines were fair. The sixth prompt showed that they found the value added skills useful and they appreciated having the opportunity to work on their research, although they were not enthusiastic about the training. Toward the end of the fall semester, a certain weariness set in, as students told us that they were tired. On a 5-point scale, they rated themselves an average of 4 on effort and 3.2 on job satisfaction. This was a low point for us: one of the students left school, and another, an art major, chose to join the ceramics crew. These two departures, together with the graduation of a third student, meant that we had lost 50 percent of our crew.

However, the spring semester saw a clear turnaround. The smaller crew proved to be advantageous, and the students seemed to be infused with a new enthusiasm for the work. Writing prompt number 8, completed in February, returned such comments as, "I feel good about doing my work. In general, I am more motivated than last semester. I will try to maintain this willingness to perform the job." Another student wrote, "I feel very confident in everything that I do here."

The reduced crew size did not present a problem in productivity as the students worked diligently to process the items that had accumulated over the winter holidays and handled the increased workload typical of spring semesters at Warren Wilson College. In fact, the students preferred a smaller crew, writing, "Keep it this size," "Three or four people is the perfect amount," and "We don't have to worry about not having enough books to process." The smaller crew size also resulted in a less noisy and crowded workspace and a more orderly work environment, elements that some students had commented on in the first semester.

Retention

We began the year and the New TiLTS project with six student workers. In September, one of our student workers had to withdraw from the crew when her home was severely damaged by the remains of Hurricanes Frances and Ivan. At the end of the fall semester, our crew was further reduced when a second student dropped out and a third left to join the ceramics crew.

As described under Writing Prompts above, we began the spring semester with a much smaller but reenergized crew. All three students are performing well, and two have indicated that they planned to return to the technical services crew next year. The third will join another crew.

Of the original six student workers, we expect to retain two. While this may not seem impressive, it represents a marked success for us and is a significant improvement over our near-zero rate of previous years.

Conclusion

We are delighted with the crew morale this semester. The students have achieved one of the main goals of the project: they have developed a sense of job ownership, unit responsibility, and workgroup pride. Our students understand the big picture of technical services. We are also pleased with an efficiency we had not anticipated: our three-person crew is able to produce as much work as was done by five to seven students before our departmental crews were combined. Moreover, the quality of the work is consistently higher than it was before the implementation of this project.

On the basis of our experiences with the New TiLTS project, we plan to refine many of the initiatives we began this year, including the following:

    Syllabus
    Workflow and color-coded flag system
    Accountability and personalization with the "Prepared by_____" stamps
    Periodic writing prompts
    Basic training for new students, with mentoring by returning students
    Award certificates for completion of basic training
    Advanced training
    Error-tracking chart
    Accomplishment chart
    Periodic refreshments and gifts

We are pleased with the outcomes of our New TiLTS project. It has given us many valuable insights into instructing, supervising, and working with student workers.

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Appendix 1: New Workflow

When request is received, check SIRSI Workflows™ program and netLibrary
↓
Search vendor database and/or *Books in Print*
↓
Place order and notify requester
↓
When items arrive, unpack, put on truck, and match order slips with items
↓
Assign flags and check SIRSI Workflows™ and netLibrary again
↓
Assign Cutter number. Bar code and tag for security and send to proper area
for cataloging
↓
After cataloging, check items, order slip, and spine label. If mismatch, return
item to Mei
↓
Affix spine label
↓
Apply plastic jackets or spine reinforcements
↓
Use special processing and labels for AV items
↓
Stamp book and affix date due slips (if not reference book)
↓
Stamp "Prepared by__" and write your name on date due slip or initial beside
bar code
↓
Final check by Joy
↓
Shelve books in new books section
↓
Notify requester that item is ready

Appendix 2: Error Chart

SKILL	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5	Wk6	Wk7	Wk8	Wk9	Wk10	Wk11	Wk12	Wk13	Wk14	Wk15	Wk16
When request is received, check catalog and netLibrary.														
Search *Books in Print.*														
When order is placed, notify requester.														
When items arrive, unpack, put on truck, and match order slips with items.														
Assign flags and check workflows.														
Assign Cutter number. Bar code and tag for security. Put on proper shelf.	7	2	5	5	6	7	7	2	14	2	2	4	5	4
Check book, order slip, and spine label. If mismatch, return item to Mei.														
Affix spine label.		2		2		1		1						
Apply plastic jackets or spine reinforcements.			1		1									
Use special processing and labels for AV items.		1	2											
Stamp book and affix	2	2		1	1					10		1		1

date due slips (if not reference. book).														
Stamp "Prepared by___" and write your name on date due slip or initial in pencil by bar code.	3	8	2	7	1		2	2			2			
Final check by Joy														
Shelve books in new books section														
Notify requester that item is ready.														
Totals	12	15	10	15	9	8	9	5	14	12	14	5	5	5

Appendix 3: Special Accomplishments Chart[‡]
A Record of Extraordinary Accomplishments by the Technical Services Crew

	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5	Wk6	Wk7	Wk8	Wk9	Wk10	Wk11	Wk12	Wk13	Wk14	Wk15	Wk16
Group															
Time cards	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*							
Shelf reading				☺											
Punctuality/attendance	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*							
Interpersonal skills															
Individual															
Busy and focused			F,J,Z	F,J,Z	F,J,Z	F,J,Z	F,J,Z								
Provides advice/assistance	J														
Communication	Z	Z					J								
Innovative and appropriate approaches															
Initiative							J								
Adaptation to changes		F													
Problem solving	F	J,Z		J											
Learning and skill development															
Workspace and equipment															

[‡] This chart is still in progress.

SELF-REPORTING: ACCOMPLISHMENTS

SELF-REPORTING: PROBLEMS