

Abstract

Title of thesis: “JUST LIKE THE LIBRARY”: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER LIBRARY STUDENT ASSISTANTS’ POST-GRADUATION CAREERS AND PERCEPTIONS OF JOB PREPAREDNESS AS IMPACTED BY LIBRARY WORK

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Career success is a major component of assessing student success, and at the Universities at Shady Grove (USG), a small campus supporting nine state universities, post-graduation success is understudied. Students employed by USG’s Priddy Library are subject to a professional development (PD) program that emphasizes skill building, professional experiences, and career competencies. This thesis uses interviews from seven former student employees to determine what students retain from the program a year after graduation, to explore their feelings on early career experiences, and to determine what Priddy Library and USG can do to better prepare students for their post-graduation careers. Job satisfaction was most positively correlated with workplace social support and most negatively correlated with overwork. Participants felt overall positively about their experiences at USG and the library, and emphasized the role that social support played in their success. Participants identified many career competencies developed at the library that they continue to use in their post-graduation careers, most notably, customer service, communication, critical thinking, time management, and professionalism.

Participants shared feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy despite degree and skill acquisition, indicating that more effort should be made to build students' professional confidence.

“JUST LIKE THE LIBRARY”: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER LIBRARY
STUDENT ASSISTANTS’ POST-GRADUATION CAREER AND PERCEPTIONS OF JOB
PREPAREDNESS AS IMPACTED BY LIBRARY WORK

by

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Background

The Universities at Shady Grove (USG) is a campus which hosts select majors from nine Maryland public universities on one single campus local to Montgomery County Maryland. USG strives to provide a competitive, high quality education at an affordable and convenient campus. Majors at USG tend to be professionally-oriented degrees that are designed to lead directly to employment in a specific field after graduation. The student body is highly diverse: 26% of students are white, 24% are African American, 23% are Hispanic, and 14% are Asian (Fall 2021 Student Demographics Report, 2021). USG students are all transfers from either a community college or a different university and only attend USG for their junior and senior level courses or for a graduate degree. Due to USG's unique educational model and the focus on affordability, many students are first generation college students, and the population tends to be older—the average age of undergraduates is 27 years old (Fall 2021 Student Demographics Report, 2021). These students attend USG with a clear goal in mind: employment in their chosen field.

The Priddy Library is a branch of the University of Maryland Libraries that exists to serve the students, faculty, and staff at USG. The library's mission is to “facilitate and sustain academic success, innovation, workforce readiness, and the creation, dissemination and discovery of information” (Priddy Library, 2019, p.3). As such, Priddy Library's services focus on meeting the needs of students where they are—which involves making decisions such as forgoing traditional collection development to instead purchase textbooks that lower-income students cannot afford or access otherwise. The library employs between 9 and 13 student employees during any given semester, who are tasked with jobs like circulating library materials, providing technical support, collecting data, triaging reference questions, and maintaining stacks (Appendix A). Student employees are generally representative of the larger USG population—

older and coming from a variety of backgrounds. They often work other jobs and internships related or unrelated to their field in addition to their role at the library.

In the fall of 2019, Priddy Library introduced a new student employee program emphasizing professional development (PD) for student employees. This PD program focuses on encouraging growth in areas that aid students' professional careers, classroom learning, and library work. These activities include: attending library skills workshops, reading articles, attending webinars, and completing employee reviews. An example of students PD options in a given semester is included in Appendix B. Each activity requires a written response, which asks questions designed to promote critical thinking and to help students reframe and retain the information given in each PD activity. At the end of each semester, students undergo a formal review, consisting of a written self-evaluation and a meeting with their supervisor to discuss their strengths and areas for improvement.

The rationale behind this program is partially to align Priddy Library's employment with USG's mission of creating a more prepared, highly skilled workforce. Additionally, the PD program is meant to make employment at the library more engaging and meaningful to student employees. The staff who initially developed this program had both been student employees in academic libraries, and knew that library student employees can have trouble envisioning how their student job experiences prepare them for the post-graduation workforce. Therefore, the goal is not just to create more skilled workers, but to build students' confidence in their professional abilities. Instead of focusing solely on building new skills, the PD program is also meant to make students aware of the career competencies they are already developing and to build confidence in their abilities as workers. As such, previous assessments of the PD program have focused on perceptions of student employees rather than on testable skill outcomes. This thesis follows suit

by exploring the experiences of former student employees as they enter the workforce. This research is also motivated by a desire to understand the outcomes of the PD program as they relate to early job experience.

Review of Literature

Student success is a term that is loaded with multiple meanings and merits exploration. The ideal outcome of a college education is not agreed upon, which creates division in how success is measured. Is the goal of higher education to prepare students for the workforce? Or is it to create better informed citizens? These two outlooks may not seem to contradict each other, but the inclination for one over the other is evident in the ways success can be measured. Instead of testing graduates' knowledge retention, it is more common to examine data such as graduation rates and job placement. College as a pipeline to the workforce is foundational to the way higher education operates today, and to the promises institutions make to entice prospective students. Although it is perfectly valid to view student success as achieving a holistic education that teaches mastery of knowledge for knowledge's sake, this definition does not align with the goals and mission of USG or the goals of its students. Therefore, this research will operate under the assumption that student success is determined by career outcomes.

In reviewing the work of established research, two fields will be examined. Firstly, literature about career-readiness for college students will be consulted to ensure an understanding of what employers are looking for and what work universities have done to meet these goals. Secondly, literature on student employment will be consulted to establish what are the norms of student work, especially in libraries. The work of other researchers in determining student employee perceptions and outcomes is especially important in determining potential themes and trends in student's opinions.

Career Readiness

If student success is defined by outcomes and career placement, then the responsibility of all higher education institutions and their administrators is on ensuring students are career-ready. The work of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2021) has led to the development of eight career readiness competencies: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. These NACE competencies were adopted by Priddy Library in the spring of 2020 as criteria which students could use to better guide their choices of professional development activities (Yager & Ofsthun, 2021).

How then do we aim our educational practices to achieve these career readiness-oriented student success goals? One answer is found in George Kuh's work on high-impact practices. "High-impact practice" is a term used to identify activities that "increase rates of student retention and student engagement" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9), first coined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. High-impact practices facilitate the following student behaviors: investing time and effort, interacting with faculty and peers about substantive matters, experiencing diversity, responding to more frequent feedback, reflecting and integrating learning, and discovering relevance of learning through real-world applications (Kuh, 2008, p.IX). High-impact practices and NACE competencies can be used in tandem: high-impact focuses on creating experiences while NACE emphasizes the competencies students should be developing. NACE guides what skills should be fostered, and high-impact practices guides what experiences can build those skills.

Initially, Kuh (2008) intended for high-impact practices to be academic experiences such as first-year experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative

assignments and projects, undergraduate research, and capstone courses and projects. This did not include student employment, but after talking with journalists about their most impactful college experiences, Kuh (2008) found that they all talked about the work they did on school newspapers and literary journals. He posits that jobs can be considered high-impact practices if employers strive to make it so, doing things like having students connect their classroom learning with their work and vice versa.

Several university employers have been striving to align employment practices with high-impact practices. Researchers such as Adeogun (2016), Mitola, Rinto, and Pattni (2018), and Arnold-Garza and Tomlinson (2017) have used the framework of high-impact practices to examine the academic potential of library employment programs. One program initiated by the University of Iowa uses the high-impact practices as a set of guidelines to integrate experiential learning into student employment (Pierard, Baca, & Schultz, 2019). Another program at New York University Libraries used the framework of high-impact practices to guide its development of a college cohort program integrated with library learning (McCartin, Brown & Feid, 2017). Mitola, Rinto and Pattni (2018) conducted a literature review of student employment practices reflected in current research using high-impact as a model. According to Kuh, having a variety of tasks that require thought and effort is more beneficial than simple monotonous tasks. Mitola, Rinto & Pattni (2018) concluded that student library employees usually do a beneficial mix of work activities such as: customer service, technical support, or more specialized tasks.

In order to better align with high-impact practices and to foster academic and career success, Mitola, Rinto & Pattni (2018) recommend that libraries spend more time in training with students and restructure their training programs to emphasize transferable soft skills such as communication.

Student Employment

The desire to make student employment more enriching has existed since libraries have used student workers. In 1943, a researcher compiled a list of tasks and wondered what else they could do to “develop the individual skills and capacity of student workers” (Charles, Lotts, & Todorinova, 2017, p. 3). Since then, administrators have continued to create new programs and publish new research in the field of student employment.

Although students’ primary reason to work while in school is financial necessity (Adeogun, 2016; Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013), students who work at libraries are also motivated by “gaining work experience,” “developing transferable work skills,” and building their resumes (Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013, p. 548). With these motivations, it follows that student employees participating in skills development programs generally express their approval of such programs. Library student employees in one leadership program expressed a desire to be trusted to accomplish more advanced tasks without a supervisor (Mestre & LeCrone, 2015). Library student employees who participated in a workshop-based learning program found skills workshops to be a good use of their time overall and found value in them professionally and academically (Melilli, Mitola & Hunsaker, 2016). Additionally, student employees feel their library work experience prepared them for their future careers (Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013) and found “value in having opportunities to develop academic professional and life skills” (Melilli, Mitola & Hunsaker, 2016, p. 430) in their library employment. Adeogun (2016) found that the skills student employees described having gained during library work align with skills identified in career success, particularly interpersonal skills. In a 2016-2019 survey of students employed through federal work study, 75% of students reported growth in six of the eight NACE competencies, with the exception of career management and equity and inclusion (previously

called intercultural/global fluency) (Akos, Leonard, & Bugano, 2021). Overall, the case studies have been broadly conclusive that students view their library or other university student employment as a positive experience that provides opportunities for skill building.

Research on student employment generally follows the case study model, focusing on one specific library's efforts in training or programmatic work. Some studies endeavor to include students' perspectives through surveys, interviews, or both. Surveys are particularly popular, perhaps due to their ease of creation and anonymous nature. Some researchers used both surveys and interviews, such as Mestre and Lecrone (2015) who used both interviews and surveys to learn about students' "concerns, experiences, and suggestions" (p. 6) regarding their employee leadership program. Jacobson and Shuyler (2013) also used surveys and interviews in their study of student perceptions of library work. One particular student interviewee identified that there were "a lot of things [they'd learned on the job] that [they] wished [they] had learned in class" (Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013, p.557). This thesis research aligns closely with Jacobson and Shuyler's exploratory work in student perception, but Jacobson and Shuyler focus on job satisfaction and learning in students' library roles, whereas this thesis will explore these concepts in post-graduation contexts.

Research Goals

Student success is a key strategic goal of Priddy Library and USG at large. One subgoal of Priddy Library's strategic plan is to "[f]acilitate opportunities for students to engage in professional experiences" (Priddy Library, p. 7), but this plan doesn't define student success. Success can be measured in a variety of ways, such as percent of students who finish degrees, average time taken to complete a degree, or rate of job placement after graduation. With a

relatively small cohort of student employee graduates, measuring quantitative values such as rate of job placement doesn't tell a complete story.

A major aspect of the student employee program at Priddy Library has been building student employees' confidence in their ability to succeed by creating a work environment which mimics post-graduation life. Therefore, examining the *perceptions* of how post-graduation life has been affected by their library employment is a good match for this goal. Using qualitative research methodology can give a deeper understanding of the breadth of student experiences, and can reveal nuanced outlooks which quantitative data can miss.

Overall, the purpose of this research is to determine the graduates' perspectives on the effectiveness of professional development and student employment on post-graduation job experiences.

The research seeks to explore the following questions:

- RQ 1 Looking back, what skills do former library student employees who have since entered the workforce feel they had gained from student employment?
- RQ 2 What do graduates feel they were prepared for and unprepared for in the professional world?
- RQ3 What can Priddy Library do to better prepare student employees for their professional roles?

Methods

This research is a qualitative case study of one library's cohort of previous student employees between the years of 2019 and 2020. Seven students were interviewed by the researcher, who was their former supervisor.

Participants

All participants were employed for at least one semester after the professional development program began (Fall 2019) and graduated from USG between December 2020 and May 2021. All ten students who met this qualification were contacted via email collected during their employment. Of the ten, nine students responded and expressed interest in interviewing, and ultimately seven were interviewed (n = 7).

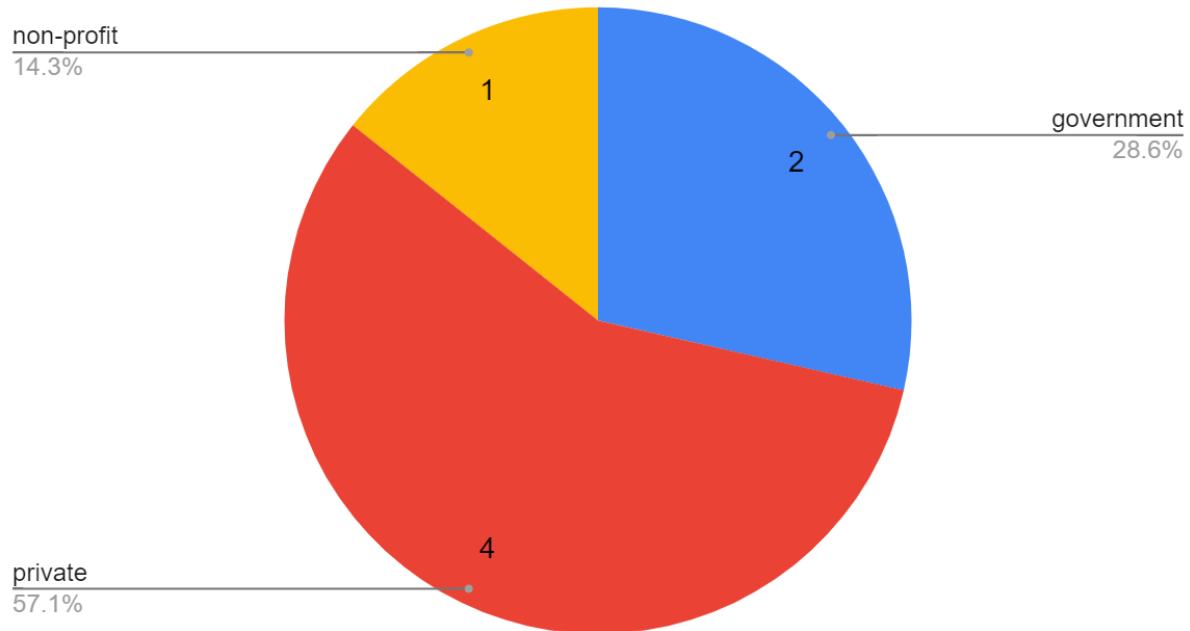
Of the seven students interviewed, all represented a different major at USG, including History, Nursing, Pharmacy, Social Work, and others. Two participants received a graduate degree and the other five received undergraduate degrees. As is typical of the student population at USG, these students represented a variety of racial and ethnic categories and life experiences. They skewed heavily female (n = 6; 85.7%). One participant had not started a position since graduating, but was slated to start after the interview, and therefore was only able to discuss feelings of preparation and their USG experience.

Table 1

Participant Professional Fields

Accounting	Healthcare	Mental Health Care	Research
Education	Information Technology	Pharmaceutical	

Participants were employed in a variety of fields (Table 1), and all but one participant were working or about to work in their intended field of study. They were employed in all sectors of work: private, non-profit, and government (Figure 1).

Figure 1*Current Work Sector of Participants****Data Collection***

Interviews were conducted with each of the seven participants via Zoom and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes with an average of 40 minutes. Although the Institutional Review Board exempted this research from review due to the low-risk of the subject matter, participants still received and signed informed consent documents briefly outlining the research, distribution, and potential risks.

Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences with post-graduation work, such as “What was it like when you first started out at your first (or current) job after graduation?” They were also asked to rate their feelings of preparation for, or satisfaction with, various questions using a Likert scale of 1 (least prepared/satisfied) to 5 (most prepared/satisfied) (Table 2). Participants were also asked what advice they would give to

current and future students, and asked to reflect on their experiences as students at USG through questions such as “Could you talk about what your life was like while you were at USG?”

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was the analytic approach used to refine these data. Thematic analysis was selected in large part due to the similarity in its approach to coding interviews done in the field of social work, of which the researcher is experienced in. The process of taking an interview and creating a process recording or social history for clients is not unlike creating a matrix and identifying themes from a research interview. Thematic analysis involves reading transcripts, generating initial themes, searching for those themes, reviewing themes, and refining themes (Silverman, 2011).

After transcripts were completed, they were read over to note passages that held interesting, significant, or unique responses. After going through a few transcripts, patterns started to emerge from highlighting these passages. Data were organized first into categories based on what they were answering, and a matrix was formed to compare participants' answers. Those answers revealed patterns and differences between participants' answers and were coded accordingly. In order to visualize what themes were emerging and how they connected and differed, the researcher made a concept map which helped organize discrete findings into patterns (Appendix C). With these patterns and themes discovered, the researcher consulted the interviews again to search for either supporting or dissenting data within their answers to other questions. For example, a participant could talk about their work-life balance when discussing job satisfaction or returning to school.

Results

Results have been coded according to participant responses and emerging themes such as social support and overwork. The first three sections focus on students' post-graduation experiences: job satisfaction, work-life balance, and future educational plans. The last four focus on students' experiences at USG: benefits of working in school, job preparedness, social support, and advice from participants

The major emerging themes from these interviews were: 1) social support—having friends, family, coworkers, and bosses who provide help—impacted work-life balance as well as job satisfaction; 2) overwork—working beyond an employees capacity—impacted almost half of the participants; 3) USG and Priddy library played a major role in skill acquisition and job preparedness, but often fell short in instilling confidence.

Likert scale responses indicate that participants rated their initial feelings of preparation for work on the lower end with a mean of 2.93 (Table 2). When examining their feelings of preparation for the workforce, students rated USG's impact highly: they responded to the question "How much of a factor did USG play in preparing you for your work?" with a mean 4.08 (Table 2). When identifying factors that prepared them for the workforce, students spoke of courses, internships, and library work, and the people attending and working at USG. This indicates that the USG experience encompasses more than the strict confines of the classroom.

Not all students answered every Likert scale question. One student did not answer "how satisfied with work are you?" and "how much of a factor did USG play in preparing you for work" due to not starting their position yet. Two students didn't respond to "How prepared do you feel for going back to school" because they had no intention of pursuing future degrees.

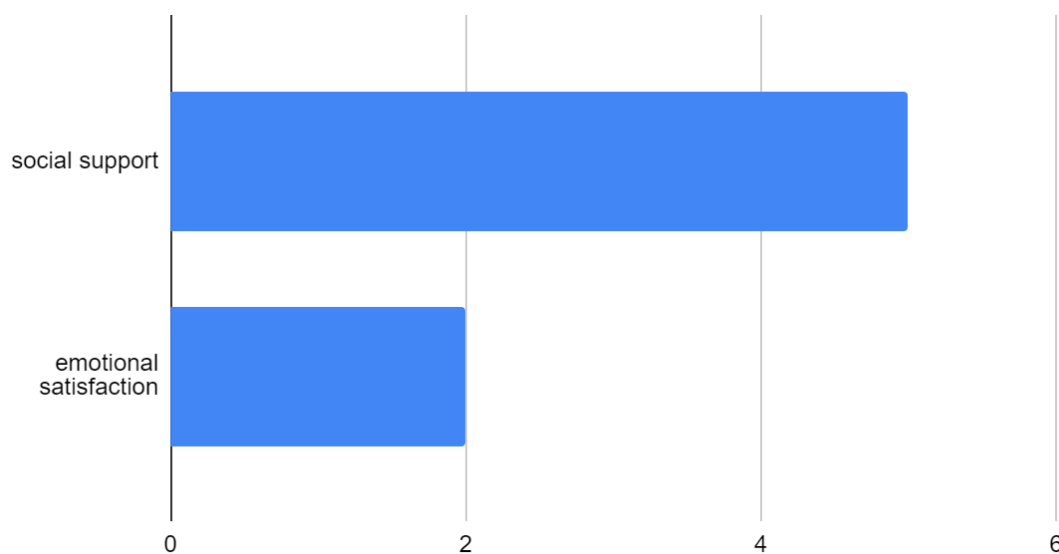
Table 2*Means of Participant Responses to Likert Scale Questions*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Response rate</i>
When you first started your current position, how prepared did you feel?	2.93	1.07	7 (100%)
How satisfied with your work are you?	3.75	1.54	6 (86%)
How prepared do you feel for potentially going to graduate school ?	3.98	1.14	5 (71%)
How much of a factor did USG play in preparing you for your work?	4.08	.80	6 (86%)

Note. Participants self-rated on a scale of 1 (least prepared/satisfied) to 5 (most prepared/satisfied).

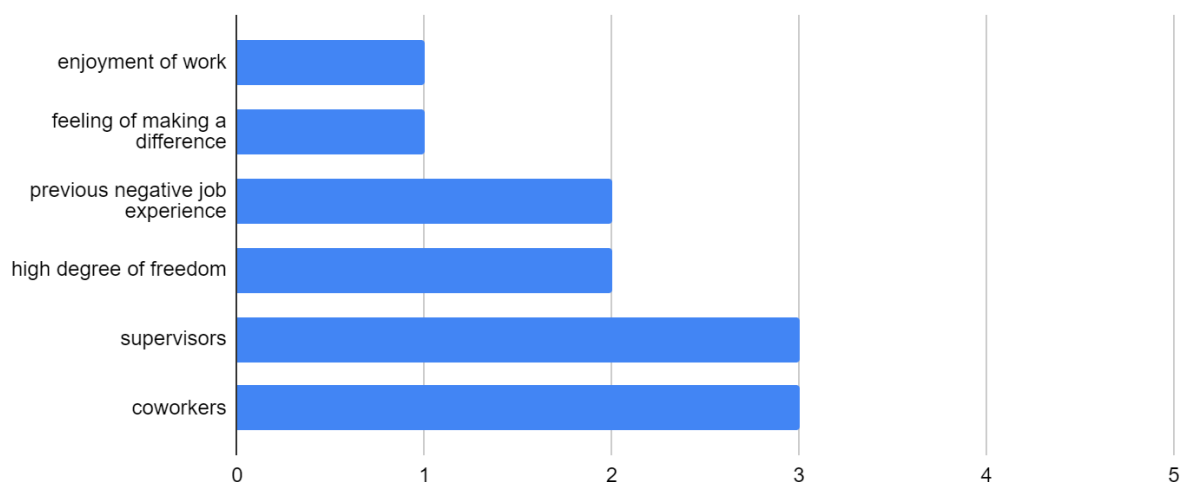
Post-Graduation Job Satisfaction

Participants were generally satisfied with their work, giving work satisfaction a mean score of 3.75 (Table 2). The two least favorable scores were 1 and 3. Two students rated their satisfaction as 5. An emergent theme was the importance of social relationships to job satisfaction. Participants were more willing to talk about the social support present at their jobs than the work itself. In fact, social support was mentioned by all participants who expressed any degree of job satisfaction (Figure 2). When breaking down the results further, participants spoke of social support originating from coworkers and supervisors equally as often (3 responses each).

Figure 2*Factors that Support Job Satisfaction*

Note. Factors expressing job satisfaction were identified in 5 of the participants' responses. One identified no positive factors and one was ineligible due to not starting their position.

All other factors related to job satisfaction were classified as emotional satisfaction and were identified in two of the five respondents that expressed any degree of job satisfaction. Factors coded as emotional satisfaction were: enjoyment of work ($n = 1$; 14%), feeling of making a difference ($n = 1$; 14%), and having a previous negative job experience ($n = 2$; 29%) (Figure 3). Having a previous job that didn't work out was a factor that made participants feel especially grateful and happy with their current work scenarios. Curiously, the feeling of making a difference or personal satisfaction was not a factor identified in students employed in helping professions. This does not mean that they don't feel a sense of satisfaction from the helping nature of their professions, but rather that they did not identify such feelings as contributing to job satisfaction in the course of the interview.

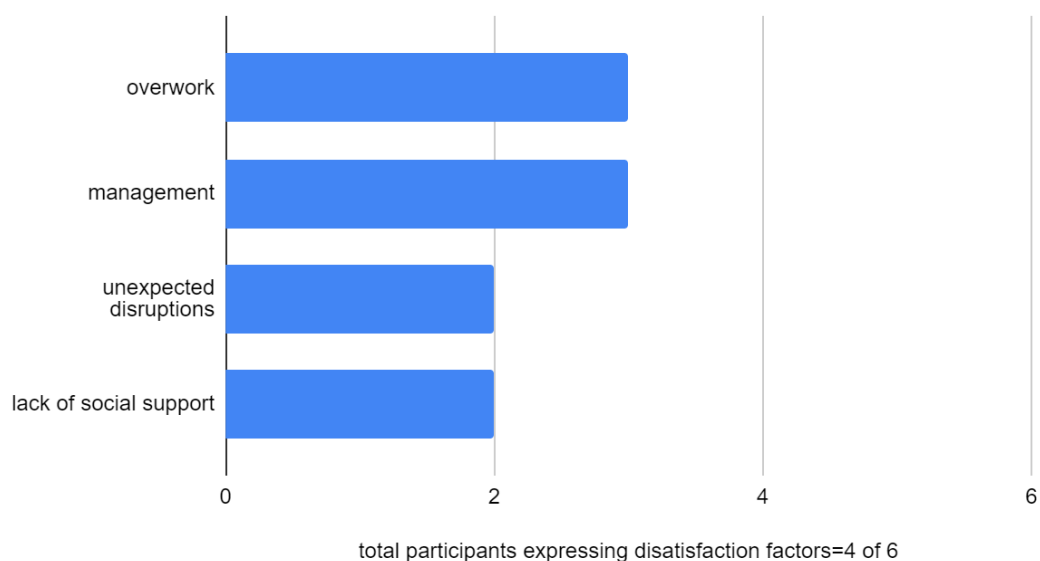
Figure 3*Subfactors that Support Job Satisfaction*

Four of the six eligible participants gave explanations for both of the negative factors influencing their scores. One student had a negative experience prior to their current position that they did not want to discuss and therefore is not represented in these scores. When explaining low satisfaction or caveats to their high satisfaction scores, multiple factors were always at play: overwork (n = 3; 43%), management issues (n = 3; 43%), and unexpected disruptions (n = 3; 43%) (Figure 4). Overwork issues were not simply long hours, but any form of over-exertion caused by work. Overwork was caused by short staffing (n = 1; 14%), work tasks expected during off hours (1; 14%), and efforts to get a promotion (n = 1; 14%). Management issues were caused by: incompatibility with supervisor (n = 2; 29%) and disagreements in management decisions (n = 1; 14%). Unexpected disruptions were caused by either irregular work hours (n = 2; 29%) or unanticipated emergencies (n = 1; 14%). The other factor identified was lack of social support, which were either feelings of isolation due to work- from-home (n = 1; 14%) or incompatibility with coworkers (n = 1; 14%). Of the four participants who expressed

dissatisfaction, all of them had multiple factors influencing their assessment, indicating that dissatisfaction was caused by factors which compounded one another.

Figure 4

Factors that Impair Job Satisfaction



Note. Factors expressing job dissatisfaction were identified in 5 of the participants' responses. Two identified no dissatisfaction and one was ineligible due to not starting their position.

Just as with positive job satisfaction, job dissatisfaction was often related to social relationships. Incompatibility with supervisors ($n = 2$; 29%) and incompatibility with coworkers ($n = 1$; 14%) mirrored satisfaction categories, but in one case, a participant did get along with work associates but lack of social support was still felt over the isolating effect of working from home (Figure 4).

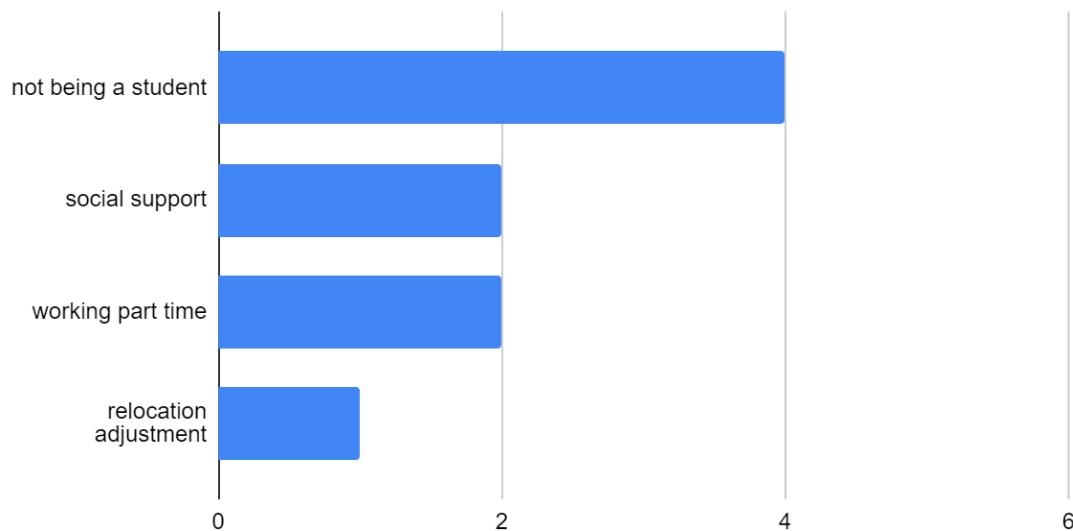
Only one participant mentioned low pay as a factor to job dissatisfaction. This may be due to the private nature of salary, or because students' starting salaries met or exceeded their expectations. This would be consistent with findings that graduates are not adequately prepared for discussions of pay and may be underselling themselves.

Work-Life Balance

Participants were not asked to rate work-life balance, but rather asked broadly how their work-life balance was and asked to compare their current work-life balance with their time at USG. Five of six (83%) currently employed participants expressed that their work-life balance was better now than when they were a student. The most frequent positive factor for work-life balance was the absence of school work (n = 4; 57%). The only participants who did not say this were either in school again or expected to complete work in their free time. All participants not currently in school were quick to bring up the lack of homework, indicating the relief they felt was significant.

Figure 5

Factors that Support Work-Life Balance



Note. Factors that positively influenced work-life balance were identified in 5 of the participants' responses. One identified no positive factors and one had not started their position.

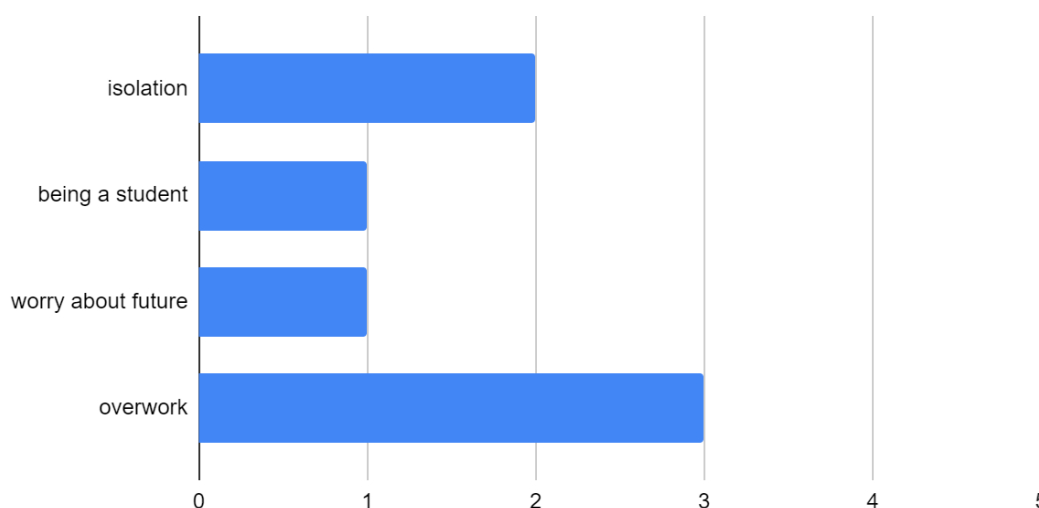
Social support was also a factor (Figure 5). One case of social support was in the form of a romantic partner and the other was a supervisor that noticed overwork becoming a problem and

stepped in to address it. Two participants (29%) were grateful to be working less than 40 hours a week at the present moment. The final factor discussed was a participant who felt they were finally settling into their life in their current geographic area whereas they struggled with homesickness during their time at USG.

Just as overwork was a prominent factor in job dissatisfaction, participants' work-life balances were impacted by overwork (Figure 6). The second most prevalent factor was isolation: two participants cited moved to new states after graduating. Not all participants who moved states disclosed this problem, but two of three did. The one participant who had started another degree program listed that as a work-life balance concern. The final concern was future overwork: one participant was worried about probable future overwork in the form of mandatory overtime.

Figure 6

Factors that Impair Work-Life Balance



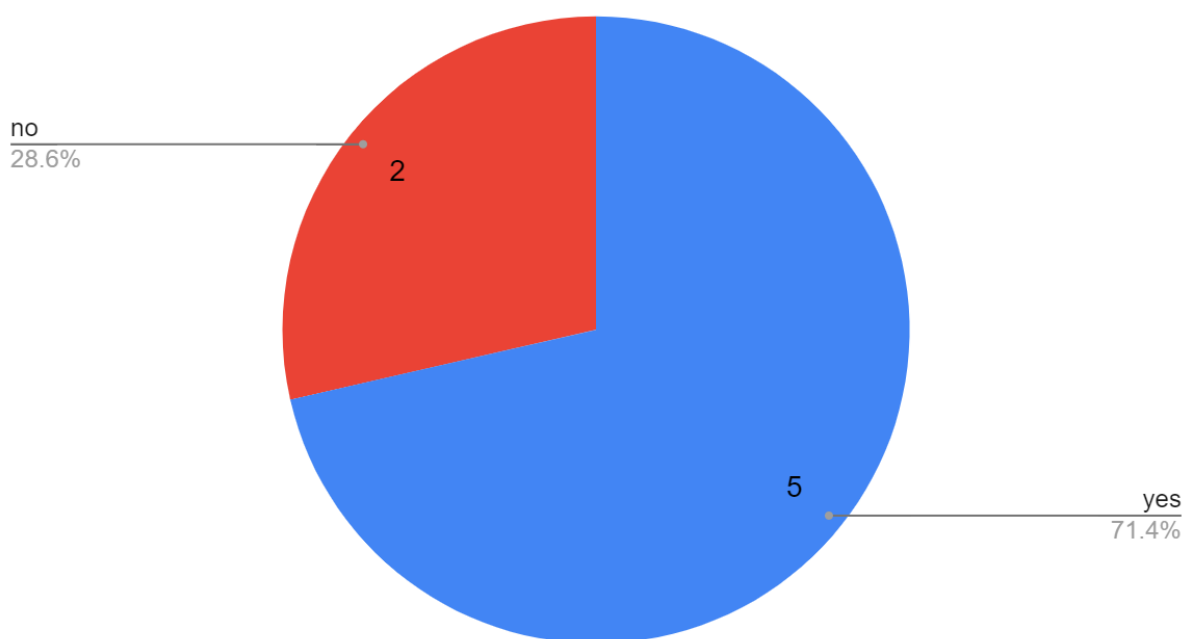
Note. Factors that impaired work-life balance were identified in 5 of the participants' responses. One identified no impairing factors and one was ineligible.

Future Educational Plans

Despite the demonstrated positive work-life balance increase that cessation of school brought, students were overall favorable to returning to their roles as students (Figure 7). Some students were considering going back to school where others were planning on it. One participant was already in another degree program. Participants who were considering going back to school had a mean score of 3.98 out of 5 (SD = 1.14) when answering “How prepared do you feel for potentially going to graduate school?” (Table 2)

Figure 7

Responses to “Would you consider going back to school?”

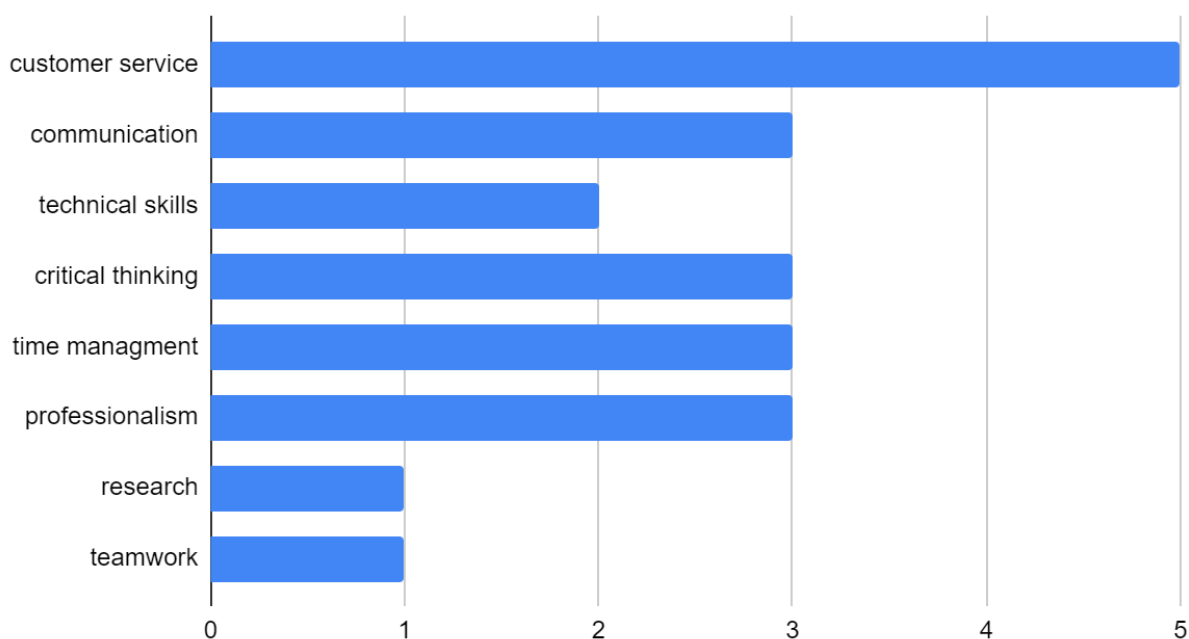


Of the two participants who were not considering going back to school, one was pursuing non-university based accreditation in their field and the other said they would pursue such accreditations in the future. One participant explained her readiness to return to school thusly: “I miss studying, that’s a lot of it. [The first reason is] I need to advance in my career. Two, I miss studying. You know, I guess I'm not satisfied yet. I just need to get that master's degree. Maybe

I'll stop there.” Most students who expressed an interest in going back to school did so out of a desire to work in a higher position in their field, or in a more specific area of that field that would require additional schooling. But there was a general sense that these participants were eager to get back into school despite the stress it brought.

Benefits of Working in School

Developing career competencies is a primary motivation in Priddy Library's professional development program, so it is encouraging that students readily identified skills gained from employment. Customer service was the most frequent competency identified (n = 5; 71%) (Figure 8). Students found customer service to be easily transferable to their current work. A participant working in information technology said that “experience with the library creating password reset help, with going upstairs helping with IT and stuff. It kind of helped with the credibility aspect of me having that computer background.” A nursing student drew this comparison: “It's just like the library. We talked to patrons. In this case, you're talking to the patient's family, so you have to be able to communicate... It's not all about the medical part of it—the part of human communication” and a social work student said “social service work is just like customer service work. Like doing intakes is like initially greeting people. [There's] lots of giving information and overviews or directing people where they should be calling.” Customer service appears to be a widely applicable skill and should not be undersold when graduates discuss their work experiences.

Figure 8*Skills gained from library employment*

Communication had significant overlap with other competencies. Some students talked about communication almost interchangeably with customer service, while others talked about appreciating that at the library they communicated with people from different degree programs and different backgrounds. When career competencies were first introduced to the program, NACE had a category called “intercultural/global fluency,” which has since been recategorized as equity and inclusion (NACE, 2021). The use of the word “fluency” in this competency had a connotation of language and communication that may have impacted participants' view of this competency. Although this term didn’t make it into anyone’s comments, the evidence that they had valued the opportunity to interact with people who were different from them was prevalent regardless. One student said, “Priddy Library broadened my scope, and you know, being able to relate to customers, being able to understand things from their point of view.” Another said, “If I

wouldn't have worked at the library I wouldn't have that confidence because I was interacting with a lot of people in the library, helping them out, talking to them and it's all different types of people.” For this participant, a large part of building competency in communication was simply gaining the confidence to do so. This was reflected in another student who talked about communication alongside feeling more confident in being able to ask questions, and meet and relate to new people.

Critical thinking is a competency that was especially emphasized by the student employment program, as students were always required to reflect on the PD activities they completed: considering what the message was, what they disagreed with, and how they would have improved the activity. They also were encouraged to question the way things were done at the library in order to make sure that rules and procedure were logical, efficient, and fair. Self-reflection was an important part of the program, which was practiced through the PD responses, written self-evaluations, and allowing students to identify competencies they wanted to develop. Because of the emphasis on critical thinking, it was surprising that only one student called it out by name, and the other two students talked around critical thinking with discussions of troubleshooting and problem solving. The participant who spoke explicitly on the topic valued critical thinking highly in their current work in healthcare saying that “the survival of this person lies with your critical thinking.” This participant talked about how one of the most difficult things to adapt to was making decisions about when to call another expert, noticing when something wasn't right, knowing when to push back on another person's decision—but critical thinking skills developed at USG were vital in making those decisions.

Job Preparedness

After addressing the skills students feel they gained from their time at USG, it's appropriate to revisit the scores participants gave themselves when answering the questions in Table 2. "When you first started your current position, how prepared did you feel?" received a mean score of 2.93 out of 5 ($SD = 1.07$). Two participants rated themselves as 2, and two participants rated themselves as 3, the other three rated themselves as 3.5, 4, and 5. In exploring what motivated lower-end responses, participants spoke on the emotional experience of starting their first full time job. One participant expressed strongly that their degree program had done an excellent job in training them, and that their transition between their academics and work training had been seamless, and yet expressed, "I'd prepared academically but I wasn't [ready], you know, I was still a little bit scared of the reality... I didn't know if I was going to do a good job." Another student expressed that despite an extensive onboarding and training process, they "never feel ready to see a client, sometimes." Two other students expressed that their feelings of preparedness were impacted by a fear of the unknown.

Although students struggled with feelings of apprehension on starting their jobs, students gave most of the credit for their preparedness to USG in different forms. "How much of a factor did USG play in preparing you for your work?" had a mean of 4.08. When explaining a score of 5, one participant expressed that the two things that prepared them for work were the courses and the customer service experience at the library. Another expressed that USG gave them the tools and that their own "go-getter" attitude was what allowed them to take full advantage of those tools.

Students were inclined to bring up certain experiences from their library employment that instilled within them a sense of preparedness or confidence in their work. Students brought up

professional development generally and specifically through webinars they recalled. Two students brought up a webinar where they learned how to deal with upset customers. Two students discussed the formal review process which involved a self-evaluation and a sit-down evaluation meeting. One participant who had experienced a work evaluation in their post-graduation job said they were “just like we used to do at the library. Where they appraise you and tell you where you’re going wrong [with] different sections. It’s so similar.” Another student who hadn’t experienced a post-graduation work evaluation yet said they “really appreciated that y’all did those employee evaluations, which I know really come up and really matter in other jobs. So, yeah, I feel like that definitely helped.” The sense that evaluation and self-evaluation is helpful as preparation for the future is consistent with previous findings that the formal review was indicated as the most engaging PD activity and received a mean approval rating of 4.91 out of 5 (Yager & Ofsthun, 2020).

Social Support

Participants talk about supportive supervisors frequently, both in their current positions and when talking about USG. One participant described Priddy Library as having a culture of respect between employees and supervisors where it was easy “to be open-minded and express yourself” with regards to coming to supervisors with problems without fear of retribution.

Another had thoughts about the management that they expressed thusly:

“I still talk about the library. You know, the management...how you managed us Student Assistants. How happy and content with the efforts you guys put in, with the little Christmas stuff you guys packaged. It’s not a lot, but it means something. You know, to us, it just shows you appreciate whatever we do, you know, and it sort of encouraged me, even if it’s like—you’re coming to the library late it’s like, hmm, let me change a little bit

because these guys are trying. Why should I not try? So you know I think you guys were able to listen and give the right guidance, answer questions, and you know, not be too judgmental of errors.”

This participant was dealing with an unsupportive work environment, and the contrast in management styles was felt significantly.

Participant Advice

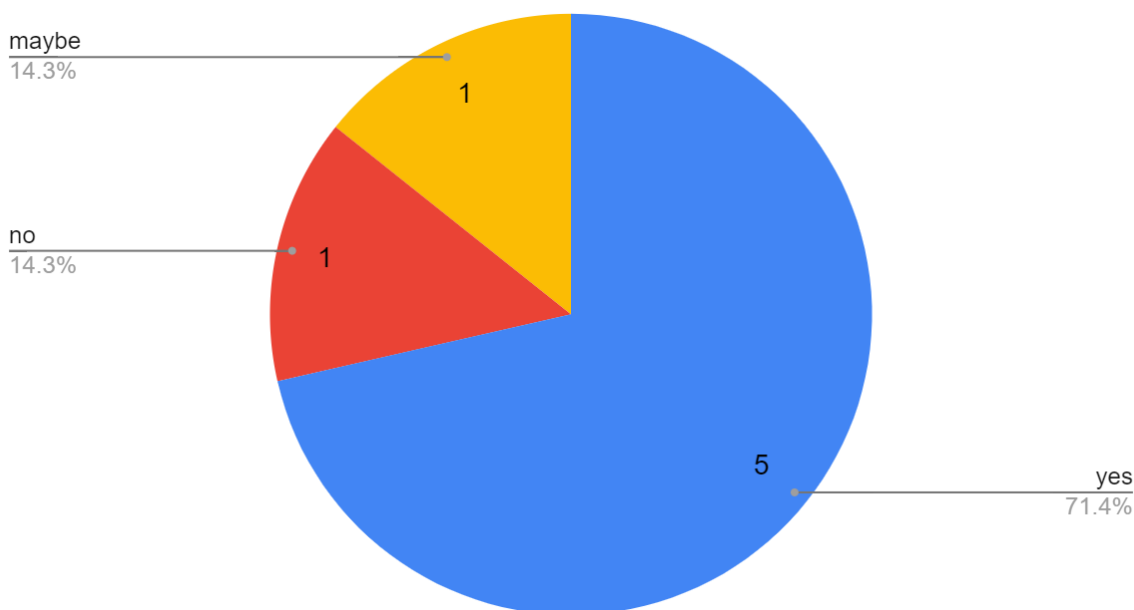
Participants were enthusiastic about giving advice to future students. Their values as students became apparent in the advice they gave to hypothetical future students. For general advice, 5 participants suggested taking advantage of USG resources. Some of these students suggested resources they'd used, such as using the library's course reserves to save money, or seeing a counselor through the Center for Counseling and Consultation. Others suggested using resources that they felt they had under-utilized, like working out at the campus recreation center or using the Career and Internship Services Center. Surprisingly, only two students suggested that future students should seek out internships or experience working in their fields. This may be partially explained by the programs USG students are in— some of which explicitly required an internship or work experience. Participants may have been viewing professional experience and their degree programs as one in the same, or too obvious to mention.

Although participants did not suggest unprompted that students should work while in school, when asked if future students should work during school, they were fairly unified in their response in the affirmative. (Figure 9). The one student who responded “maybe” was concerned that students could end up in jobs which are too much to deal with, and that if the choice is between having a job and getting a better grade, that students should focus on getting a better

grade. The participant who indicated that students should not work, said that if work isn't necessary for financial ends, then "why do it?"

Figure 9

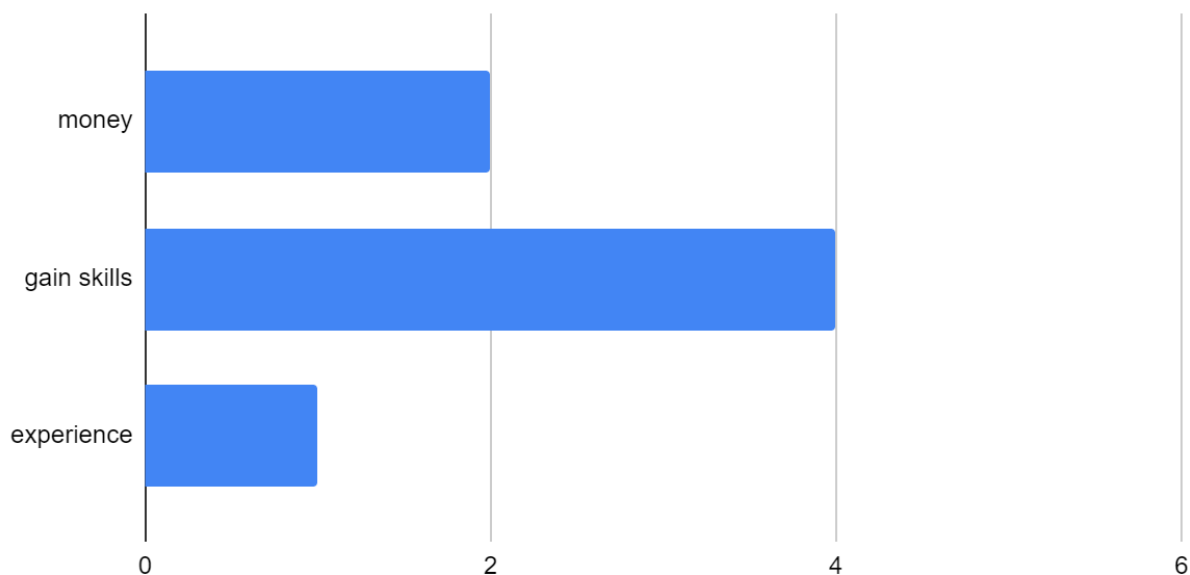
Responses to "Should students work while in school?"



The most common reason participants gave to encourage work during school was gaining job skills ($n = 4$; 57%) (Figure 10). One student expressed that having any work experience on a résumé could help justify value to potential employers—this student noted that they had used their library experiences to justify having enough prior experience in a seemingly unrelated field to get hired. Curiously, despite previous findings that students' primary motivation to work was to earn money (Adeogun, 2016; Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013), only two participants (29%) responded with financial motivations (Figure 10). Participants had some distance between their student life and their current careers, so it's natural that the money they gained from work was secondary in their minds to the other benefits of employment, like skill acquisition, resume building, and overall professional development.

Figure 10

Responses to “Why should students work during school?”



One participant’s statement seemed to exemplify why students were focusing on gaining job skills over relevant professional experience: “It’s not always about taking experience related to your field. If you take other experience, it helps you grow professionally, and it makes your mind a little more developed in another sense, which I think is necessary at times.”

Discussion

The present findings align with previous research, particularly in respect to the development of skills and competencies during student employment (Adeogun, 2016; Akos, Leonard & Bugano; 2021, Melilli, Mitola & Hunsaker, 2016). Participants in the present study identified similar motivations for work as previous research in financial necessity, work experience, and developing skills (Adeogun, 2016; Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013). The framing of the question was different in this study—rather than asking why they worked at Priddy Library, students were asked if they would recommend that other students work while in school, and if they would recommend the library in particular and why. Participants talked about working at

the library as a way to build career skills and competency (n = 4; 57%) more frequently than they talked about money (n = 2; 29%). The framing of the question as advice to future students may have had the effect of minimizing the financial component in the minds of these participants, or the distance between the interviews and their time as students may have made the money seem less important. Still, the answers to this question indicate that former Priddy Library student assistants understood the aims of the PD program. Further, their recollection of skills and competencies gained from their time at Priddy, as well as their application of specific PD activities in their early careers indicates that students did indeed internalize the PD program.

Three themes emerged from the results of this study; the importance of confidence, the necessity of social support, and adjustments to work.

Building Confidence

Students consistently identified that both the courses and work experience at USG worked in tandem to prepare them for their post-graduation jobs, but there was something missing between skill building, academic mastery, and truly feeling prepared. When talking about preparedness, participants returned to mental health topics; fear of the unknown, anxiety over making mistakes, and feelings of inadequacy. These students were highly trained, could identify key skill competencies they'd gained, but what they lacked was not skills or knowledge, but *confidence*. Building confidence has been a goal of the PD program, and although many students seem to have developed confidence in their library roles, there is a deficiency of confidence in their professional roles.

On the other hand, participants identified key moments and experiences from their time at USG that helped them feel prepared for life post-graduation, whether it was remembering a time they were able to help a difficult patron in the library, receiving good marks on a difficult exam,

or landing an impossible internship. These experiences were what participants could lean on when they felt unsure in their preparedness or capability in post-graduation work. Because many students at USG are lower-income, non-traditional students, they don't always have the same opportunities to engage in unpaid internships that give higher-income students an advantage in acquiring work experiences. Purposeful introduction of professional-like experiences in paid student employment can help equalize the playing field.

Future PD programming will introduce and replicate confidence-building experiences such as assigning tasks outside of student comfort zones or encouraging students to try new things that they feel unprepared for. Completing tasks where the possibility of failure is high in a supportive environment where mistakes are encouraged can give future students the chance to become acquainted with and prepared for the uncomfortable parts of future employment.

The Importance of Social Support

The other common thread throughout these findings was the importance of interpersonal relationships, more than the work itself. In the post-graduation workplace, social support was found to be a supporting factor in both work-life balance and job satisfaction. When discussing courses, participants talked about professors as often as they talked about exams. Participants summed up their USG experiences by talking about the people; their classmates, coworkers, professors, bosses, and fellow students. This indicates that in these students' eyes, the service that USG provides is intertwined with the people who provide that service. Similarly, a good or bad boss can make or break a workplace setting. Students who dealt with supervisors that encouraged or enforced overwork, or had trouble clicking with colleagues experienced dissatisfaction and stress. And on the other hand, students who described past and present supervisors as patient and supportive had a high satisfaction in those roles, regardless of other factors like difficulty or

tediousness of the work. Overall, graduates want to feel supported and connected to others in their professional roles.

Adjustments to Work

The graduates in this cohort all experienced some degree of telework and distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants along with many others experienced the sudden blending of work with home life while at the library and in their job positions. As the conversation evolves on how work ought to be, these students' experiences lend a helpful view of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Participants who worked part time were happy with the arrangement, especially the positive work-life balance impacts. One participant who worked full time expressed their desire to work part time at their next position. One student also mentioned having trouble adjusting to working 40 hours initially, but that they got used to it after a while. The overwork problems these graduate students face could be greatly decreased, if they worked less than 40 hours with additional staffing support. These recent graduates showed changing attitudes about work, whether it's desiring part time positions, or reconfiguring their lives to suit the realities of work during a global health crisis. Although it was not the main focus of this study, participants' experiences were influenced by circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants entered a different job market, better for some students and worse for others. Telework arrangements between individuals were too different from one another to form any patterns—Telework was a positive for some, a hindrance to others.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this research is the scope. This is a case study of one library at a fairly non-traditional campus. The students employed by and attending USG are older than average, more likely to have had previous part time jobs, and have a reputation of being more

serious and career-focused as compared to traditional university students. Additionally, the participants for this study were all former library student employees, a subsection of the total USG student population that can differ in significant ways. Not every student who applies to the library gets a position, and not every student has the time or desire to work at the library, which sets these former library students apart from their peers. This PD program may have had different results in different environments, and the experiences of these students seeking and gaining employment may have been different as well.

Another limitation is that the researcher conducting this study was also the previous supervisor and one of two creators of the professional development program. Assurances were made to each participant that their honesty was valued and that all of their experiences, no matter positive or negative, were important to the research and future of the program. The already established relationship came with the benefit of instant rapport with the interviewees, as well as a high response rate for a relatively lengthy interview, but also came with the drawback that participants were potentially more reticent to bring forward the shortcomings or difficulties of the program.

Finally, the conditions that these participants graduated and entered the job market were impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of preparedness in particular may have been decreased due to the sudden change to the job market and many aspects of the work they had been preparing for.

Conclusion

Universities may not have the ability to fully prepare students for the experience of leaving academia, but when building up career competencies, it is imperative that students are viewed holistically as people. Graduates are embarking into a stage of life that departs

significantly from the world they've known as students, a journey that involves dealing with rejection during job interviews and entering into a world of work that can differ significantly from their school-centered life so far. Classroom learning and skill acquisition are great tools to get students employed after graduation, but they also need experience and coaching to build their confidence in their new professional identities. This is especially important for students at USG, many of whom are first generation students, or are older students attempting to reinvent themselves in a new career path.

If a more holistic view of career readiness is adopted, future research could explore questions like: What are ways that confidence can be developed alongside other competencies like communication, leadership and technical skills? How can we prepare students for the emotional reality of work post-graduation? Can we give students the tools not just to work on teams but to build true social support and ask for help when they need it?

The professional development program at Priddy Library will continue to grow, especially to accommodate these findings, and continue to conduct assessments to determine the efficacy of the program and future directions. Future research could bring in other voices from the student body at USG, like comparing the outcomes of student employees in other departments or students who work outside campus. Additionally, research that relies less on the case study model and instead pulls from a variety of different universities could give a much fuller picture of larger trends in the world of work. As work changes, universities have a responsibility to ensure that their students are prepared—academically, professionally, and emotionally—for what their futures hold.

Appendix A

FALL 2021 Student employment job description

Priddy Library is seeking current USG students to join our student employment program. Library Student Assistants are the front line of the library, staffing the library services desk, answering patron questions, and maintaining and organizing the library collection. Hours are dependent on availability and need, and are assigned on a consistent semester-long basis.

Student Assistants will cultivate a variety of professional competencies that will assist them in their future careers, such as research, technical, and customer service skills. Professional and personal growth is an expectation of employment at Priddy Library--Student Assistants will engage with development activities such as workshops, trainings, and webinars. Student Assistants will also undergo formal reviews every semester, which will help them improve as employees and gain experience in the evaluation process.

Job responsibilities

- Provide informational, technological, and reference support to patrons in-person, online, and by phone
- Loan, return, and renew items such as books, DVDs, or equipment
- Maintain and organize library collection
- Open and/or close the library
- Collect and record library usage statistics
- Complete at least 6 approved professional development activities per semester
- Help enforce and monitor the library for adherence to library use policies, including temporary, health-based restrictions

Note: This list of primary duties provides a summary of the major duties and responsibilities of this job. Student Assistants perform other related duties as assigned. Specific duties and responsibilities may vary based upon departmental needs.

Qualifications

- Must be enrolled in at least one credit-granting class at USG (in-person or online) for Fall 2021
- Must be available to work in Fall 2021
- Must have customer service skills, ability to respond to patron questions and concerns respectfully and courteously
- Must have basic computer proficiency and be able to learn library technology and specialized program operation
- Must be able to operate standard office equipment
- Must be able to lift, transport, sort, and shelve library materials according to classification
- Must be able to maintain patron confidentiality under state & federal law

Appendix B

Example of an outline of the PD options given to students

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

FALL 2021

Schedule

*PD options biweekly from 7/14-12/1 (11 options)

*PD must be done by Friday December 3rd

*Self-evaluation done by Sunday December 5th

*Formal reviews: Dec 13th - Dec 23

Articles

***THREE** required by end of the semester

****Don't forget to fill out a [Article Engagement Response](#)**

	Title & Link	Competency
7/14	10 Steps To Effective Listening & What Great Listeners Actually Do <i>*Please review both articles and use the "two paired articles" option to respond to them together</i>	Communication, customer service
7/29	Is This How Discrimination Ends? (there is an audio version of this article in the link as well)	Critical thinking, intercultural fluency
8/11	Learning Charisma & The Awkward but Essential Art of Office Chitchat <i>*Please review both articles and use the "two paired articles" option to respond to them together</i>	Customer service
8/25	Academia Isn't a Safe Haven for Conversations About Race and Racism	Intercultural fluency
9/8	The Best Leaders Are Versatile Ones	Leadership
9/22	Give Yourself a Break: The Power of Self-Compassion	Mental health
extra!	Priddy Library Strategic Plan and USG's Reflect, Reimagine, Rebuild Report <i>*Please review both articles and use the "two paired articles" option to respond to them together</i>	Library / higher ed
10/6	Why Entrepreneurs Shouldn't Waste Time On	Professionalism

	Personal Branding AND Why Personal Branding Is Dead And More Important Than Ever <i>*Please review both articles and use the "two paired articles" option to respond to them together</i>	
10/20	Can Student Assistants Effectively Provide Chat Reference Services? Student Transcripts vs. Librarian Transcripts	Research, library
11/3	All of Us Are Smarter Than Any of Us	Teamwork
11/17	7 Sneaky Ways You're Sabotaging Your Productivity AND 5 Surefire Rituals To Ease Your Sunday Anxiety (& Make For A Successful Monday) <i>*Please review both articles and use the "two paired articles" option to respond to them together</i>	Time management
12/1	Taking Constructive Criticism Like a Champ	Other

Webinars/trainings

***ONE** or **TWO** required by the end of the semester

****Don't forget to fill out the [Webinar Engagement Response](#)**

	Title & Link	Competency
7/14	Working with Upset Customers	Customer service
7/29	Using Questions to Foster Critical Thinking and Curiosity AND Improving Your Judgment for Better Decision-Making <i>*Please review both webinars and use the "two paired webinars" option to respond to them together</i>	Critical thinking
8/11	Writing Email	Communication
8/25	Skills for Inclusive Conversations	Intercultural fluency
9/8	Learning to Be Assertive	Leadership
9/22	Managing Anxiety in the Workplace	Mental health
extra!	Laying Foundations for Growth: Student Employment Built on Professional and Personal Development	Library

10/6	Defining and Achieving Professional Goals & Successful Goal Setting <i>*Please review both webinars and use the "two paired webinars" option to respond to them together</i>	Professionalism
10/20	Writing Articles	Research
11/3	Essentials of Team Collaboration	Teamwork
11/17	Mastering Self-Motivation	Time management
12/1	The art and science of feedback	Other

Workshops

<https://shadygrove.umd.edu/library/workshops>

***ONE** or **TWO** required by the end of the semester

****Don't forget to fill out a [Workshop Engagement Response](#)**

[View our available workshops](#) and register at a time that works for you

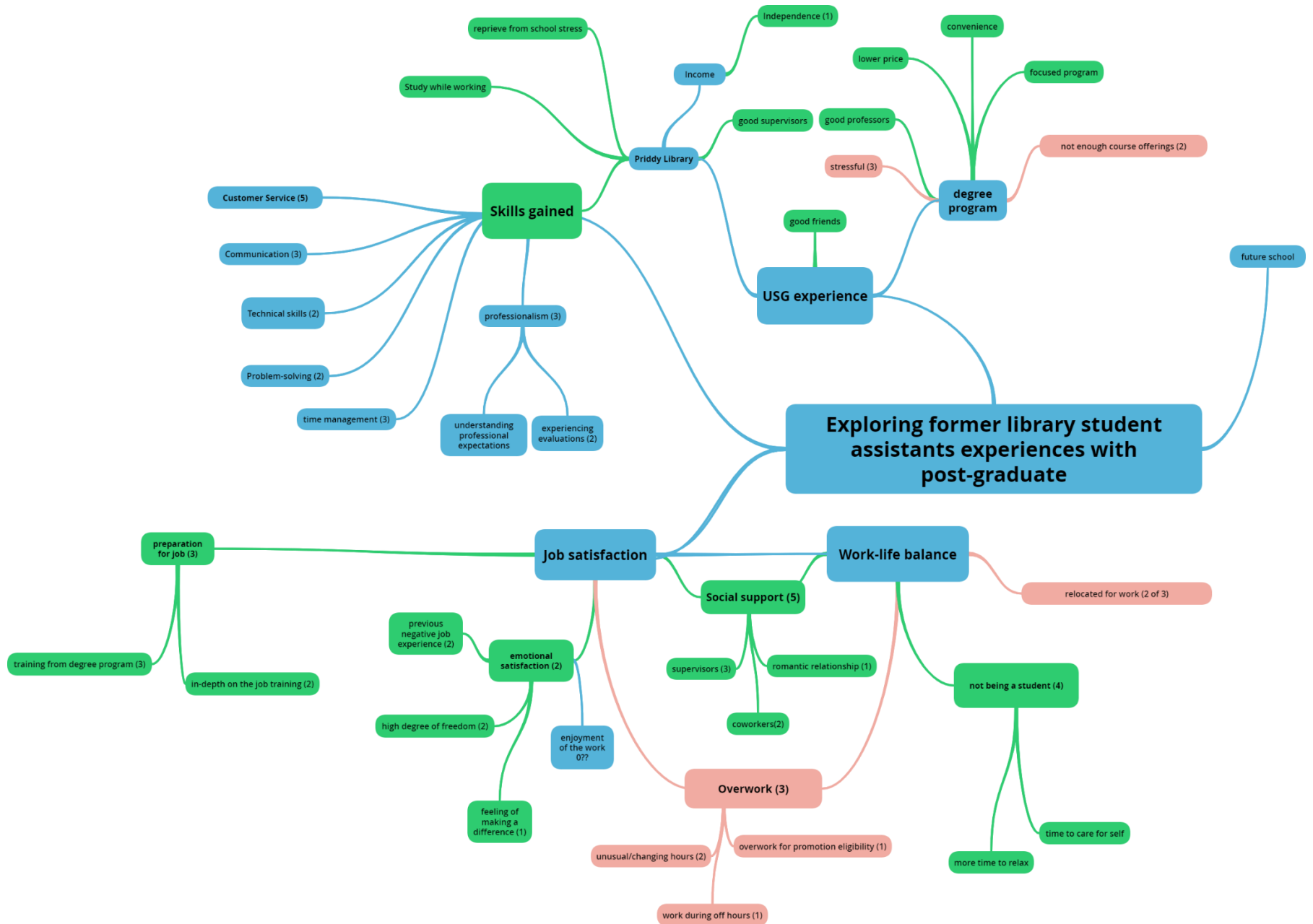
Competency Definitions

Communication	Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others; and can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively. X
Critical thinking	Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness. X
Customer service	Navigate customer/public interactions effectively. The individual is able to understand and provide for customer needs, as well as handle difficult situations.
Intercultural fluency	Value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences. X
Leadership	Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others. The individual is able to assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others; use empathetic skills to guide and motivate; and organize, prioritize, and delegate work. X Includes self-leadership and initiative
Mental health	Understand and address the mental health needs of the self. The individual

	understands their emotional and cognitive needs and can identify ways to address their challenges.
Professionalism	Demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes. x
Research	Seek and assess new information The individual has the ability to navigate search tools to seek out new information, and to assess relevance and accuracy.
Teamwork	Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. The individual is able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict. x
Tech/ applications	Leverage existing technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals. The individual demonstrates effective adaptability to new and emerging technologies. x
Time management	Organize and plan how to divide time between specific activities (x). The individual can accurately plan the timeframe a task will take and uses work time effectively.

Appendix C

Concept map used to visualize and organize during thematic analysis



Appendix D

Interview Protocol

[When recording]: Recording of *[Name]* on *[Date]* begins now. Thank you so much for participating. Before we get too far into this, I know you've already seen the informed consent form, but I'm going to explain the purpose of the study, what we'll use the information for, and then we can proceed.

This study is being conducted as a part of my Master's in Library Science thesis for the University of Maryland. My goal is to explore "career readiness," by talking about some of your experiences working and studying at the Universities at Shady Grove and your experiences in entering the workforce. Since you have been a Priddy Library employee, I'm also hoping to explore how that experience impacted your life after graduation. I am doing this work as a researcher, and in attempt to improve the student experience here at USG, so I'm looking for truthfulness about your experiences, so don't feel you need to portray your experience in any kind of particular light. I just want to know what it was like broadly, good, bad, or neutral. (no right or wrong answers)

This research will be shared with a thesis committee of University of Maryland professors, then will be shared with the broader public and specifically with Universities at Shady Grove staff and program coordinators. In order to protect your identity, your name will not be anywhere in the final results, and any names of professors and past or current employers will be removed. Quotes you have that are about your specific major may still have the major attached if it is relevant. If you mention something you'd rather not have included in the study, just say so and I will remove that section from the transcript. If you would like to back out of the study at any time, you may do so. I can delete this recording and not include any of what we've talked about.

I'm happy to clarify any questions you have. Do you have any concerns I can address before we start?

Do I have your consent to start the interview?

First, I want to just catch up with you a little, what has your life been like since graduation back in *[year]*?

- Can you give me a run down of your work life after graduation?

[Clarifying questions about the work they've done after graduation:]

- How has that been?

- Do you enjoy it? What about your work do you enjoy?
- What kind of work do they have you do?
- Is it full time work? Is it salaried or hourly?
- Broadly, what sector of work do you identify your work now as? (*profit/ non-profit/government/ etc*)
- Are you working in the field you intended to be working in while you were at school?
- What are the kinds of skills you're using in your day to day work?

What was it like when you first started out at your first (or current) job after graduation?

- How does work measure up to the way you thought it would be?
- How was training and onboarding? What did they have you do?
- Have you had continuing training or professional development since your initial training? Like what?
- What was the most difficult thing to adapt to?
- Can you think of any classroom experiences that helped prepare you for this work?
- Did any of your previous work experiences help prepare you for your full-time work?
- Is there a specific area you wish you'd had training in before starting?
 - Do you feel like the classroom or workplace would be a better fit for that kind of training?
- How prepared did you feel when you first started your job? 1 to 5.

How is your work-life balance?

- How has it been juggling your work and other responsibilities?
- How does your work-life balance now compare to how it was at USG?
- Are you planning on staying in this position or with this company?
- How satisfied with your work are you?: 1 to 5

Are you considering going back to school for a graduate degree [*or second graduate degree*]?
[If, yes]

- Why are you considering graduate school? What degree? Masters/doctorate?

Why not?

- [*If it's money*] would you go back if your employer was paying or you had a good scholarship?
- [*If it's something else*] If that wasn't a factor, would you want to go back to school?
- How prepared do you feel for potentially going to graduate school: 1 to 5
 - What prepared you?

We've talked a lot about your life as it is now. Let's back up a bit, could you talk about what your life was like while you were at USG?

- What do you remember about working at Priddy Library? What was the kind of work you remember doing?
- When you put Priddy on your resume, how did you describe the work you did? What were the skills you talked about?
- Is there anything you do now that reminds you of something you used to do at Priddy?
- If you had to redo your time at USG, what would you do differently?
- What did you do to prepare yourself for your career while you were at USG?
 - Did it help? Is there something else you would have done?
- How much of a factor did USG play in preparing you for work? 1 to 5

What would your advice to future USG students be?

- Should they work while in school?
 - Part-time or full-time?
 - Is there any value in working at a Library specifically?
- Are there specific courses they should take?
- Are there specific resources they should utilize?

Closing questions (a few options depending on what we've talked about so far):

- What is next for you?
- Are there any experiences you feel like we haven't talked about that you feel might be relevant?
- What are you hoping for from your next position?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me that we haven't covered?

[Conclusion] Thank you so much for your time today, this interview has been very illuminating and it's been wonderful to hear about your experiences. Is there anything we've talked about today that you want me to strike from the record and not include in the final research?

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