

Rose Barbalace, Tara Maharjan, and Megan Lotts

Bringing the federal work-study program home

The Rutgers University Libraries-New Brunswick student worker program goes virtual

Libraries often pick up the work of education where the classroom leaves off. This was certainly the case when the Rutgers University Libraries-New Brunswick (RUL-NB) agreed to employ 250 student workers virtually when classes went online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters.

What happened

In early August 2020, RUL-NB administrators approached the libraries—one of the largest employers of work-study students on campus—to see if they would be willing to continue to employ returning library work-study students through the federal work-study program. During this time, other units on campus were not offering student jobs while classes were online, many campus buildings were closed, and most university faculty and staff were working from home. The federal work-study program exists to provide students with an income while they are studying, as well as valuable career experience. Before the pandemic, the federal work-study students at RUL-NB staffed service desks, shelved books, processed user requests, and completed special projects for the libraries. Most of these tasks did not easily translate to remote work, and the libraries didn't have enough special projects to keep the more than 200 students employed, so moving online would be a significant undertaking that would require creativity and thinking outside the box.

After much consideration, RUL-NB agreed to facilitate an all-remote work-study program for the fall semester, which was extended into the spring semester. In the fall, of the 250 work-study students assigned to the libraries, roughly 230 students chose to participate in the remote-work project. The rest deferred their employment until spring, hoping by then they would be able to come to work in the building.

In April 2020, the RUL-NB Student Coordinator Group (SCG), which includes 13 faculty and staff¹ who directly supervise and manage library student employees, started meeting frequently to prepare for the upcoming academic year, though they did not yet know whether they would need to plan for an all-virtual or hybrid environment. When the SCG team learned that an all-virtual student worker program would begin on September 1, 2020, they were surprised but ready. Inspired by a University of Oregon Libraries' pandemic work-study student program, SCG created

Rose Barbalace is student coordinator at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, email: rose.barbalace@rutgers.edu, Tara Maharjan is processing archivist at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, email: tara.maharjan@rutgers.edu, and Megan Lotts is art librarian at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, email: megan.lotts@rutgers.edu

two 15-week curriculums, one for the fall and one for the spring semester. Each week the students would complete six or seven hours of asynchronous work. The weekly assignments focused on different professional development skills, such as time management, customer service, and problem solving; cultivating personal development competencies in areas of diversity and inclusion, self-care and mindfulness, and work/school/life balance; and increasing their knowledge of remote research strategies, legal issues around information, Rutgers history, and libraries and archives. Each coordinator decided what topics would be presented to their students and for how long. Some topics allowed for a deeper understanding and had more resources available, meaning a coordinator may have focused on a particular topic for two weeks. As the semester went on, SCG introduced a Friday workshop series that allowed students to virtually engage with each other while learning more about the theme addressed in the week's assignments.

Three approaches

Although all 230 students employed by RUL-NB in the fall 2020/spring 2021 semesters worked virtually, their experiences varied widely depending on their designated library and supervisor. The three supervisors profiled below provide a snapshot of the different approaches.

Large group—Rose Barbalace

Throughout the planning of the virtual work-study program, I maneuvered between two roles: one being cochair of SCG and the other as the student supervisor for the Alexander Library, the largest library unit at RUL-NB. As SCG cochair, I navigated the approval process for getting the unprecedented virtual work-study program off the ground. This included updating work-study job descriptions for financial aid, developing a virtual timesheet, and figuring out what platform would be used to host the virtual program. At the same time, I was developing assignments for my own cohort of 55 students who would be participating in my unit's work-study program in the fall 2020 semester.

From the beginning, the SCG team knew we would need to be creative, so we designed a plan for sharing information and curriculum content. This allowed members of the SCG team to use each other's content when they were too busy to create their own, and it also meant student supervisors could select content to fit the needs and interests of their units. Each pay period (two-week cycle), 12 hours of content was posted that focused on a new theme. Students could choose when and how many hours to work during each pay period. The curriculum for each theme included a mix of learning tools such as LinkedIn Learning, TED Talks, webinars, YouTube videos, and other library and web resources.

Most of the student supervisors of larger library units used Microsoft Teams to host their virtual work-study programs because it offered a chat feature that allowed for easy communication among student workers and between students and supervisors. It also allowed for customized permissions to protect confidential documents like timesheets. Some library units with fewer than ten student workers opted to share content via email or Google Docs instead.

The SCG team instituted a Friday afternoon workshop series to allow students to connect with supervisors and each other and delve more deeply into each cycle's theme. Along with my SCG cochair, I reached out to library faculty and other RUL-NB partners, such as career services, the counseling center, and the School of Business, to assist in hosting and facilitating the 13 workshops in the series.

One of the hardest parts of transitioning to an all-virtual work-study program was losing direct engagement with students. Reading through weekly assignments helped supervisors stay connected to what was happening in students' lives. I often responded to student comments on an assignment with a message in Microsoft Teams to continue the conversation and offer more feedback when necessary. Most of the student feedback I received was overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciated the flexible environment, but they also said they could not wait to come back and work in person. As our student workers come back into the physical libraries, I plan to be more mindful of what the students learned during their virtual work-study year. I intend to incorporate more professional development experiences into my unit's work-study program going forward.

Small group—Tara Maharjan

Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) is a different type of library within RUL-NB. The collections do not circulate, and patrons must visit the reading room to see the unique materials. The experiences of SCUA's work-study students are also different from those of other library student workers. Normally, SCUA student workers greet patrons in the reading room, help them register to use the collections, ensure they understand SCUA's unique rules, and provide security. The students also work with individual faculty and staff members on additional projects, such as scanning materials, working in the conservation lab, or creating content for social media. Usually, each SCUA faculty or staff member oversees one or two students, for a total of ten to fifteen student workers each year. SCUA does not have a designated student coordinator, so after learning that work-study students would be returning virtually for the fall 2020, I agreed to oversee all SCUA student workers in addition to my role as processing archivist.

All but seven of SCUA's existing work-study students graduated in May 2020. One of those seven students transferred to work elsewhere on campus, and another decided not to participate in the program. With just five students to supervise, I considered assigning transcription projects or metadata clean up, but decided against these kinds of preparation and oversight intensive projects. Instead, I decided to focus on creating a personal and professional development curriculum tailored to the student workers' majors, skills, and interests. The curriculum included online tutorials, activities, and prompts that are useful for the students now and as they move into the workforce, and it also allowed me to get to know the students better by asking them to create and share gratitude lists and de-stress playlists during mindfulness week. To build mutual trust, I made sure to share my own gratitude list and playlist.

Since I was working with a small group, I was able to quickly change the curriculum in response to my observations and student feedback. For example, midway through the fall semester, all but one student had fallen behind. I decided to let the other students catch up on the work they missed and crafted a personal lesson for the one student who had kept up, focusing on the student's unique interests. The smaller group size allowed me to get to know the students personally, making sure that they got the most out of the program.

One on one—Megan Lotts

As the RUL-NB art librarian, I only supervise one work-study student, who holds the position of Art Library reference assistant, so my experience with the online work-study program was different from those of Maharjan and Barbalace. The Art Library work-study student in fall 2020 had held the position since fall 2018, when the student came to Rutgers as freshman. In the two years

the student had worked at the Art Library, they had spent roughly half their time working independently, both remotely and in the library, but roughly half of the work usually took place in the physical Art Library.

To make the position entirely virtual, I created a plan that allowed the student to work on a variety of projects, including scholarly research; using LibGuides software; creating spreadsheets and analyze data; creating videos² (this task included learning about storytelling and shooting and editing film footage); learning about content aggregators; learning to use and work with Qualtrics software; developing and deploying a student worker survey; producing a regular feature for the RUL-NB weekly newsletter; and working extensively with the multidisciplinary Urban Sketch project.³

We tracked the work with a Google document that was updated weekly, and I sent the student an email each Monday. We met virtually when needed, but most communication was via email. Although the student never came to the physical building, this was one of the student worker's most productive years as an Art Library employee. This productivity could be attributed to the student's prior knowledge and experience with the Art Library's priorities and patrons, or perhaps the one-on-one mentorship allowed the student to better see and understand their role as a student, employee, and lifelong learner, a valuable perspective for anyone applying for internships or entering the job market.

Discussion

In the end, the program far exceeded RUL-NB's expectations in terms of student engagement and impact. The circumstances forced everyone to be nimble and present every step of the way, helping the program to stay on point and reminding the Rutgers communities that, even during a pandemic, the libraries are creative, and show up to engage and support our students.

At the beginning, students expressed sadness about not returning to campus, but they were also grateful to have work, which provided a sense of normalcy, a steady paycheck, and a sense of community during unprecedented times. Most of the federal work-study students at RUL-NB are first-generation students and/or come from marginalized communities. Many found themselves suddenly living in tight spaces with family members, which sometimes came with unexpected responsibilities like babysitting younger family members. For these students, the stability, community, and income their virtual work-study jobs offered was especially valued.

The program facilitators continuously gathered data and feedback from students through questionnaires and weekly assignments, allowing them to adjust the content and engage with students. SCG also designed an end-of-semester wrap-up Qualtrics survey that included questions about the virtual work-study program as a whole, allowing coordinators to learn what the students liked and disliked, so they could pick themes that better matched students interests and make content changes between the fall and spring semesters. While a few students noted that some weeks felt more like an additional class, most reported they believed the skills they learned will help them move forward in their library jobs, in the workforce after graduation, and in life in general.

Missed opportunities

Now that the program is completed, the team can reflect on the opportunities they missed to enrich the curriculum with outside support. SCG had only a few weeks to create the

fall 2020 curriculum, so they didn't have time to fully engage faculty and staff outside the group. The planning for spring was less rushed, so SCG was able to consult with experts from across the university in developing weekly assignments and the Friday workshop series.⁴ SCG also wished they had collaborated with the RUL-NB learning community, which was created to support faculty and staff as they worked from home. Finally, SCG realized they could have provided students more opportunities to learn about librarianship as a field and facilitated a mentorship program for work-study students interested in pursuing a career in libraries or archives.

What's next

The libraries now have a valuable curriculum, including more than 575 themed assignments that can be used for a variety of future programs and projects. Going forward, SCG will work with RUL-NB faculty and Rutgers student services to build on this foundation and create more ongoing personal, academic, and professional development sessions for students. SCG had hoped to continue the Friday workshop series, focusing on professional development and life skills. However, due to the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive training and retraining of new and returning students, and Hurricane Ida hitting campus on the first day of the fall 2021 semester, the libraries are still working to develop this program.

The virtual project allowed SCG to see that the libraries should keep track of student workers' skills and interests outside of work and then customize tasks to build on student goals and strengths. Giving our students more practical experience in their areas of interest will benefit both the libraries and the students. In turning the federal work-study program into a virtual experience, the libraries were able to re-evaluate what students gain from employment in libraries and get to know the vibrant skillsets student workers bring to the table, advancing librarianship and the future of libraries in exciting new ways.

Notes

1. The authors would like to note that this program would not have been possible without the members of the RUL-NB Student Coordinators Group: Rose Barbalace (cochair), Grace McGarty, Dean Meister, Chiaki Mills (cochair), L. Miller, Nita Mukherjee, Roselyn Riley-Ryan, Mohammad Mansouri, Corinne Suarez, Edward Suarez, and Kaila Ward. In addition, Tara Maharjan, from Special Collections & University Archives, and Luke Sangiamo, from the RUL-NB Shipping Department, who joined SCG to collaborate on the remote work-study program.

2. "Rutgers Art Library Tour" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHiFTPOmKYM>.

3. "Rutgers Urban Sketch Guide" <https://libguides.rutgers.edu/urbansketching/home>.

4. Maharjan reached out to the Office of Academic Success for help with the theme focused on study strategies, a finance professor for the personal finance theme, and an economics professor, who provided a six-hour crash course in economics. She also worked with a nutrition educator from the Family and Community Health Sciences Program at Rutgers Agricultural Experiment Station, who provided helpful information on nutrition and healthy eating on a very limited budget. ♪