

## Research Article

# Learning by Doing: Undergraduates as Employees in Archives

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**Abstract:** Staffing levels in the archives of large universities are usually inadequate. The ready availability of undergraduates provides opportunities for improving staffing levels at reasonable costs, but employing undergraduates in university archives presents problems as well as possibilities. There are aspects to the recruitment, selection, and training of student employees that are unique to the archival environment. Drawing on personnel literature applied to archival settings as well as on recent surveys of undergraduate student employees in archives, this article offers suggestions for the effective use and management of undergraduates as university archives employees.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY. A significant number of university archives are using undergraduate student employees in their repositories in a variety of tasks ranging from the routine to the complex. To date, however, there has been little discussion in archival literature of the proper role and optimal use of this important group of employees.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, numerous articles in library management literature deal with the employment of undergraduates, but none takes into account the unique environment of the archives. Failure to consider how the special needs of archival repositories affect the employment and training of undergraduates may result in a lower standard of service to patrons and in poorly processed collections.

A survey designed for this article examined the employment of undergraduates in archives and took the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix A of this article). The questionnaire was mailed to more than 100 large university archives in the United States;<sup>2</sup> of the 132 archives contacted, 81 responded, producing a response rate of 61.4 percent. Seventy-two (or 88.9 percent) of

the respondents indicated that they were using students in some capacity; the nine repositories that were not using undergraduates cited financial reasons, a preference for graduate assistants, or the belief that training undergraduates was not worth the effort. Thus the vast majority of university archives are using undergraduates in their operations. One institution reported as many as 33 student employees, although this was an exceptional case. The mean number of students employed was 4.4; these employees together worked for an average of 51 hours per week, or 11.8 hours per student per week.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the study's most significant discovery was that archival student employees are assigned a wide range of duties—a far broader spectrum of tasks than those given to student employees in libraries, who typically perform only routinized tasks such as checking out books, reshelving materials, and filing cards. Such relatively mundane tasks as typing, filing, and paging materials (as well as other routine clerical work), however, lead the list of duties most frequently performed by archival student employees (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

Almost 80 percent of university archives that responded use undergraduates to do at least minimal collection processing. Nearly half the archives surveyed involve students in public service activities, such as staffing reference desks and handling routine inquiries. Almost as many use them for preservation-related tasks.

When asked if students in their departments were performing “professional” tasks, 37.3 percent of the university archives (25 of 67 responding to the question) replied that they were. And 86.6

<sup>1</sup>At least one conference session, “Recruiting and Managing Volunteers, Interns, and Students,” Midwest Archives Conference program session, Spring 1989, has been devoted to the use of students and volunteers in archives. However, there has been no thorough discussion of issues relating to student employment in the archival literature. See footnote 2 for a published summary of a survey on this topic.

<sup>2</sup>A comparable survey was undertaken earlier by the Committee to Study the Use of Student Assistants of the College and University Section of the Society of American Archivists (hereafter referred to as the CSUSA survey). The results were summarized in “Final Report of the Committee to Study the Use of Student Assistants,” *Academic Archivist* 8, no. 1 (January 1990): 7–9. The two surveys overlapped, in that they examined the extent of student employee use, the capacities in which students were being used, and student job qualifications. Our survey, however, was limited to undergraduates and centered around our working hypothesis that students are frequently used for a wide range of tasks, including processing, that require more than minimal skills and training. In cases in which similar questions appeared on both surveys, the two sets of data invariably reinforced each other.

<sup>3</sup>The CSUSA survey (p. 8) found that the average number of students employed was 3.24, the average weekly total of student hours was 37.6, and the average hours per week per student was 12.1.

<sup>4</sup>These tasks correspond closely to the tasks identified in the CSUSA survey (p. 9).

Table 1

Tasks Performed by Student Employees in Archives (Number of responses: 72)		
Task	No.	%
Clerical tasks	69	95.8
Photocopying	65	90.3
Paging	63	87.5
Processing	57	79.2
Reference	35	48.6
Conservation	30	41.7
Others, including exhibit preparation, errands, stack maintenance, microfilming	23	31.9

percent agreed with the premise that "there is a place for undergraduate employees in a university archives department in other than routine or clerical-type jobs."<sup>5</sup> A number of respondents identified specific projects that particularly able students had accomplished in the past, including preparation of exhibits, writing a column on university history, and customizing computer programs. We conclude that a substantial number of university archives are asking students to perform moderately complex tasks that require intelligence, judgment, and specialized skills. This is most certainly true of those students engaged in processing collections, who are frequently put in the position of making decisions about appraisal, arrangement, and conservation or who at least must know how to identify problems so that they can refer them to supervisors. Undergraduates who do any processing at all must have some notion of such basic archival principles as provenance and original order.

Supervision of students is not as straight-

forward as it is in the more standardized environment of the university library. In the late 1950s, the library management literature began to examine the issue of student employees in college and university libraries. Given the dependence of nearly every academic library on such workers, several writers observed that more attention should be paid to selection and training.<sup>6</sup> Although a few of these articles can offer some guidance in the management of student personnel in archives, the differences between library and archival environments demand a reexamination of all aspects of this topic.

### Personnel Management and Undergraduate Archives Employees

The remainder of this article examines the unique issues relating to the employment of undergraduates in archival repositories. It is structured around four recognized core functions of personnel administration: employee procurement, work and reward allocation, development of employee skills, and employment sanction.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>In "Student Assistants in Academic Libraries: From Reluctance to Reliance," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 11 (May 1985): 93-97, Emilie C. White examines libraries' uses of student assistants from a historical perspective. Among the best treatments of the topic in the library literature are Guy R. Lyle, *The Administration of a College Library*, 4th ed. (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1974), 164-69; Michael D. Kathman and Jane M. Kathman, "Management Problems of Student Workers in Academic Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 39 (March 1978): 118-22; the same authors also produced a useful continuing education manual, *CE 107: Managing Student Workers in Academic Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1983); Donald G. Frank, "Management of Student Assistants in a Public Services Setting of an Academic Library," in *Operations Handbook for the Small Academic Library*, edited by Gerald B. McCabe, pp. 91-98 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); and the recent publication by David A. Baldwin, *Supervising Student Employees in Academic Libraries* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>A few respondents agreed with the statement only within the context of an internship.

<sup>7</sup>These categories are used to classify personnel administration activities in *Human Resource Manage-*

**Procurement.** The procurement function involves the recruitment and selection of the best employee for a given position. Procurement is the core personnel function most heavily subject to federal, state, and, most significant for academic archives, university regulations. When recruiting and selecting employees, even student employees, public colleges and universities (as well as those receiving public funding in the form of financial aid for their students) must comply with various statutes, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the 1988 Immigration and Naturalization Service requirements regarding proof of U.S. citizenship or the appropriate visa.<sup>8</sup> Federal regulations governing financial eligibility must be taken into account when hiring students through work-study programs.

To allow potential student employees to assess their skills in relation to job openings, job descriptions are recommended. Development of job descriptions requires managers to identify the tasks the employee is to perform; the conditions under which the tasks are to be performed; the standards by which performance will be judged; the skills, knowledge, and ability required for the job; and any other qualifications.

The university archives responding to our

survey were asked to identify the qualifications they desire when hiring undergraduate employees (see Table 2). Personal qualities such as dependability, reliability, and maturity were most frequently cited, followed closely by training or interest in history, and clerical skills.

Developing job descriptions for undergraduates in archives can be difficult because of the variety of duties required of a given employee. If undergraduates are processing collections, consideration must be given to the special credentials required for such positions, such as coursework in

Table 2

Qualifications		
Cited by at Least 10 Percent of Respondents (Number of responses: 72)		
Qualification	No.	%
Dependability/reliability/maturity	25	34.7
Training or interest in history	24	33.3
Clerical skills	24	33.3
Accuracy/neatness/carefulness	18	25.0
Computer/word-processing skills	15	20.8
Previous archival/library experience	9	12.5
Communication/writing skills	8	11.1
Ability to lift heavy boxes	8	11.1
Intelligence	8	11.1
Other qualifications cited by fewer than 10% of respondents include the ability to work with people, ability to work appropriate hours, honesty or discretion, ability to learn quickly, personality, ability to work independently.		

ment in Public Organizations: A Systems Approach, edited by Gilbert B. Siegel (Los Angeles: University Publishers, 1973). Siegel's useful classification system appears (somewhat modified) in standard texts such as Donald Klingner and John Nalbandian's *Public Personnel Management: Contexts and Strategies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 15-30.

<sup>8</sup>For example, the University of Toledo's *Student Employment and College Work-Study Policy and Procedures Handbook* (1986) prohibits discrimination on the basis of "race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex and age or handicap." The manual also states that the university's anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies apply to the employment of students as well as to other employees. Supervisors should consult their student employment office to determine whether such policies apply to students at their institutions.

and knowledge of history, an ability to communicate effectively in writing, basic word-processing and computer skills, research skills, an ability to work independently, and organizational capabilities. Security requirements should be considered carefully because recent experience indicates that many thefts from archives and special collections have been by employees. If tight security is required, managers may want to consider a background check of applicants before hiring. This condition of employment must be spelled out in the job description, and students would be required to supply addresses and phone numbers of references. In addition, some archival material (such as student academic records and academic grievance files) may contain confidential information, and discretion and trustworthiness must therefore also be considered. Finally, an ability to lift heavy boxes may be a prerequisite for many positions.

Most universities have regulations governing public postings of the vacancy and application and interview procedures. Brief but formal application forms are a must; even if a standard universitywide form is required, the archives might supplement it with a form of its own (see Appendix B). The form should request essential personal data. Other questions might cover computer literacy, skills especially suited for the archives position, college honors and scholarships, previous work experience, and references. A class schedule may help employers to ascertain whether the student will have time to devote to work, especially if classes conflict with the archives' hours of operation. The application should be brief, but it should be thorough enough to allow initial judgments to be made about the candidate's qualifications. Selection of candidates for interviewing should be based principally on the data provided by the applicant. Responses to questions on the application can be surprisingly revealing, especially if they contain numerous errors in spelling and grammar. In addition, ref-

erences from faculty members familiar with the operations of the university archives are often good indications of a student's potential.

Evaluating candidates for student positions is often difficult in the interview situation, due to several factors relating to the archival environment. First, few undergraduates have any previous experience in an archives, and most are unaware of its function and purpose. Second, because work duties often run the gamut from routine filing to complex analysis of collection content and preparation of finding aids, determining which students will be able to cope with both the mundane tasks and the intellectual challenges is not easy. Good signs are varied interests, perceived maturity, and a natural curiosity, which can often be determined by the types of questions the candidates ask during the interview.

At the outset, the candidate should be provided with a detailed summary of the position. The interview should familiarize the student with the function of an archives, its collections, and its clientele. This introduction need not take more than a few minutes. If a brochure about the archives is available, the archives should give the student a copy to take home. A few prepared questions add form and organization to the interview, which typically lasts twenty minutes to half an hour. Allow time for the interviewee to ask questions. Preferably, all of the student employee's potential supervisors, up to and including the department head, should sit in on the interview, and all should be asked for their opinion of the candidate.

**Work and reward allocation.** Closely related to procurement is what personnel specialists refer to as the work and reward function, which includes human resource planning, job analysis, and pay determination. When planning the use of human resources, archival administrators must carefully consider staffing levels of non-professional, transient undergraduate em-



ployees. For example, staffing requirements for undergraduates will differ between archives serving primarily patrons who require in-depth reference assistance and those that have limited public activity. Likewise, archives with hundreds of feet of unprocessed backlog and few staff members will have different needs for undergraduates from those requiring extensive and highly technical conservation work on very valuable collections. In human resource planning, it is important to remember that undergraduates are not substitutes for professional staff. Responsiveness toward the patron and effectiveness of operations must be the guiding factors in all human resource planning, and this is especially important when planning the use of nonprofessionals such as undergraduates.

The classification of student employees in archives may well differ from those employed in the library. Because of varied and specialized requirements for archival work, jobs for undergraduates in archives are likely to be more difficult to fill with competent individuals than other on-campus positions. To attract and maintain the best undergraduates, higher job classifications and pay are desirable. Classification at higher pay ranges recognizes that archives positions have greater demands, which could make the positions more attractive to the best and brightest students. However, such ranges are not possible at all universities. Many administrators perceive even professional archival work to be clerical, and convincing them that undergraduate students employed in archives deserve higher pay scales is difficult.

**Development of employee skills.** This is the core personnel function most affected by the archival environment. Articles in library literature point to the need for detailed manuals of procedures aimed at student employees.<sup>9</sup> Although such man-

uals have a place in archives as well, writing them can be more difficult because routinization of tasks is uncommon. Manuals detailing all the decisions likely to be made during processing or all possible reference questions would be impossible to produce. Undergraduates therefore need to be exposed to the fundamental principles of archival theory and practice early in their training. One approach is to require new employees to read selected portions of the Society of American Archivists' basic manuals,<sup>10</sup> supplemented by a manual aimed exclusively at students and outlining the particular details of the repository's policies on photocopy restrictions, patron registration, and security. Other sections of the manual should detail procedures for particular archival tasks (for example, the maintenance of clippings files) that are performed by students. Our survey revealed that only a quarter of the respondents used assigned readings, and more than half did not use a training manual (see Table 3).<sup>11</sup> Although developing a student manual as part of a training program is very time-consuming,

Table 3

Training Methods		
(Number of responses: 72)		
Method	No.	%
Personal instruction	71	98.6
Training manual	32	44.4
Assigned readings	18	25.0
Group training	14	19.4
Other	4	5.6
Little or no training	6	8.3

dent Assistants," 53, and Lyons, "Student Workers," 96.

<sup>10</sup>We have found David B. Gracy II, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977) to be particularly helpful in student training.

<sup>11</sup>The CSUSA survey data (p. 9) indicated that exactly half of the respondents had no training manual.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Frank, "Management of Stu-

the investment pays off in the long run. The supervisor will discover that less time will be devoted to individualized training and supervision; as one survey respondent wrote, "Training is the key."

Training and developing employees are closely related to what personnel administrators call job design, or the structuring of tasks so that workers are encouraged to maintain high quality and high motivation simultaneously. Recent personnel research indicates that the best job design ensures that employees will feel responsible for the quality and quantity of work they perform and that they will have first-hand knowledge of the results of their work. The variety of tasks assigned and the worker's perception of his or her job as valuable and significant are other important motivational factors. Applying this theory to the archival setting, the supervisor would, whenever possible, avoid assigning to any employee single, tedious, endless tasks, such as re-folding or reboxing large collections or inputting computer data. A good compromise is to interrupt a long-term, monotonous project with regular, short-term assignments (e.g., clipping newspapers, checking in university publications, or performing simple conservation repairs). These smaller tasks have an identifiable beginning and end, which makes them more satisfying than endless refolding of large collections. Allowing students to assist with reference instills in them a sense of pride in their work, especially when they service a collection they helped to process.

Once the student is trained, supervisors should take an active interest in employee development. Undergraduate employees should be expected to grow and mature in the position, and as growth becomes apparent, supervisors should be quick to praise a job well done. Because pay raises based on merit are usually not possible, other rewards might be considered. As one survey

respondent wrote, "Recognition of student participation in an activity boosts productivity." Such rewards include assigning a particularly talented employee more important collections to process and providing additional public service duties. Involving student employees in the production of exhibits also allows them to demonstrate their creativity.

**Employment sanction.** In this case, employment sanction relates principally to the evaluation of individual employees. Evaluations remind students why their tasks are important, reinforce good performance, and point out weaknesses so that they may be corrected. Conversely, supervisors can receive feedback on their supervisory skills from students. Evaluations may be formal, involving a written rating form with commentary and a follow-up meeting, or informal, consisting of individual discussions with students regarding their current activities, accomplishments, strengths, and weaknesses.

In either case, evaluations should be scheduled on a regular basis, perhaps at the end of each semester or quarter. Before the evaluation takes place, the supervisor will want to review each student's processing projects or other work to ensure that performance is up to standards. Regular reviews will reveal problems that might go undetected until such time as a reference question cannot be answered due to a disorganized, inaccurate finding aid, or part of a collection cannot be found because of mis-shelving.

In most cases, a frank discussion with the employee will avoid future problems, conflicts, and grievances. However, cases of chronic lateness, rudeness to patrons, or other serious offenses should be thoroughly documented in writing, even though they have been discussed with the student. If the problems recur, the documentation can serve to support dismissal. Supervisors should review their institution's current policies

concerning grievances and dismissals *before* a crisis situation arises. Most universities have well-established procedures for students who wish to file grievances against employers, but firing procedures are often less clearly defined.

### Conclusion

University archives are employing undergraduates in large numbers to perform a variety of tasks, some even quasi-professional in nature. This article has sought to adapt some of the most relevant conclusions from personnel management literature to the employment of undergraduates, taking into account the unique features of the archival environment.

Despite their usefulness, undergraduate employees in archives clearly should not be regarded as a virtually cost-free source of labor. The investment of the supervisor's time in selection and training is substantial, and the institution incurs certain separation costs (including loss of productivity and continuity) when student employees leave. Every undergraduate is a temporary employee, available for four years at most, and usually for a briefer period. Nevertheless, our survey respondents reported almost universally (98 percent) that they were

satisfied with the benefits provided by student employees, and several applied adjectives such as "essential" and "indispensable" to their undergraduate work force. One commented that "students can bring a great deal of enthusiasm and energy to the work and provide us all with a fresh, new perspective on what we're doing." In addition, most university archives that employ students have had the satisfaction of seeing a few undergraduates drawn into the archival enterprise and go on to careers in the field. Direct involvement with original documents through work in an archives can be a far more effective recruiting device than career counseling offered by faculty advisers.<sup>12</sup> It therefore behooves the professional archivist to make sure that each student's work experience is a positive one.

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<sup>12</sup>Frank C. Adams and Clarence W. Stephens have commented on the importance of the educational component in some student positions: "Ideally, the goals for supervisors in work experience should not differ materially from the objectives of the instructor in the classroom or in the laboratory. Especially is this true in those educationally oriented student jobs which are supervised by academic personnel and where the work experience is located in departmental units." (See *A Student Job Classification Plan for Colleges and Universities* [Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972], 7.)



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**APPENDIX A****SURVEY ON THE USE OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EMPLOYEES IN UNIVERSITY  
ARCHIVES DEPARTMENTS**

Please complete the following questions and return in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope by February 28, 1990.

1. How many undergraduate students do you employ in your university archives department?

\_\_\_\_\_

If you do not employ undergraduate students in your university archives department, please skip to question 12.

2. How many total hours per week do the undergraduates as a group work?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Who directly supervises the work of the undergraduates? (Please provide this person's job title).

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Who hires and fires your undergraduate students? (Please provide this person's job title).

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What sort of qualifications do you look for in undergraduates you hire to work in the university archives department?

6. Do your undergraduate employees perform any activities you would consider professional?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Specifically, what tasks do your undergraduates perform?

\_\_\_\_\_ Paging and reshelving of collections and/or books

\_\_\_\_\_ Reference assistance

\_\_\_\_\_ Processing of collections

\_\_\_\_\_ Clerical tasks

\_\_\_\_\_ Photocopying for patrons

\_\_\_\_\_ Conservation/preservation tasks (phase box construction, encapsulation, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify below)

8. What methods do you utilize to train your undergraduate employees?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Personal training/orientation by immediate supervisor
- \_\_\_\_\_ Group training/orientation with other employees
- \_\_\_\_\_ Written manual of procedures for department
- \_\_\_\_\_ Assigned readings in standard texts, such as the *SAA Basic Manuals*
- \_\_\_\_\_ Little or no training given
- \_\_\_\_\_ Type of work involved does not require training
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify below)

9. Are you generally pleased with the quality of work produced by your undergraduate employees?

\_\_\_\_\_

9a. If not, why not?

10. Are you generally pleased with the quantity of work produced by your undergraduate employees?

\_\_\_\_\_

10a. If not, why not?

11. Do you wish to continue to employ undergraduates in your university archives department?

\_\_\_\_\_

12. If you do not presently employ undergraduate students in your university archives department, would you if you had the opportunity?

\_\_\_\_\_

13. Do you believe there is a place for undergraduate employees in a university archives department in other than routine or clerical-type jobs?

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Do you have any internships for undergraduates who are interested in learning about archives?

\_\_\_\_\_

14a. If so, are these paid or unpaid?

\_\_\_\_\_

14b. On average per individual, how many hours per week do(es) the intern(s) devote to work in the university archives department?

\_\_\_\_\_

15. Please include any additional thoughts you have on the use of undergraduates in a university archives department. You may use the back of this form if necessary.

**Optional Information:**

Name of person completing survey:

\_\_\_\_\_

Title:

\_\_\_\_\_

Employing Institution:

\_\_\_\_\_

Estimated total linear or cubic (please specify) of holdings in university archives department:

\_\_\_\_\_ cubic/linear feet

*Thank you for your time and information. A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed. Please return to: Canaday Center for Special Collections, University of Toledo, 2801 West Bancroft, Toledo, Ohio, 43606. If you have questions about this survey, please call (419) 537-2170.*

## APPENDIX B

## CANADAY CENTER STUDENT ASSISTANT APPLICATION FORM

PLEASE PRINT

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Applying for position in: \_\_\_\_\_ Archives \_\_\_\_\_ Rare Books

STUDENT NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Last

First

Middle Initial

UT ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

UT PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

HOME ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

HOME PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

SOCIAL SECURITY NO. \_\_\_\_\_

UT COLLEGE \_\_\_\_\_

EXPECTED GRADUATION DATE \_\_\_\_\_

MAJOR \_\_\_\_\_

TYPING SPEED (WPM) \_\_\_\_\_

What computer experience have you had? (include types of microcomputers—e.g., Macintosh, IBM-compatibles—and software packages with which you are familiar)

What other skills and capabilities do you have that would make you a good candidate for work in the Center?

What foreign languages can you read?

College honors, societies, scholarships, and activities

(Optional) What are your personal interests or hobbies?

## Canaday Center Student Assistant Application Form—con't.

### PREVIOUS WORK EXPERIENCE

EMPLOYER	DESCRIPTION OF WORK	DATES		WAGES	REASON FOR LEAVING
		FROM	TO		

REFERENCES (Names, addresses and phone numbers—At least two faculty and/or employers, preferably local and not relatives)

Maximum number of hours per week (not to exceed 16) you could work in the Canaday Center \_\_\_\_\_

Date available for employment \_\_\_\_\_

### SCHEDULE

CHECK ONE; FALL QUARTER \_\_\_\_\_ WINTER QUARTER \_\_\_\_\_ SPRING QUARTER \_\_\_\_\_ SUMMER \_\_\_\_\_

### SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND TIMES *NOT AVAILABLE* FOR WORK\*

	M	T	W	TH	F	COMMENTS
8:00-9:00 am						
9:00-10:00 am						
10:00-11:00 am						
11:00-12:00						
12:00-1:00 pm						
1:00-2:00 pm						
2:00-3:00 pm						
3:00-4:00 pm						
4:00-5:00 pm						

Place an X in the square to indicate the hours you are in class, or busy and *NOT* available for work.

### FOR CANADAY CENTER STAFF USE ONLY

DATE INTERVIEWED \_\_\_\_\_ INTERVIEWED BY \_\_\_\_\_

DATE HIRED \_\_\_\_\_ AREA \_\_\_\_\_ STARTING DATE \_\_\_\_\_

COMMENTS: