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## Work Study Students at VCU: Quality versus Quantity

Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute, Virginia Commonwealth University

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# THE GRACE E. HARRIS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

## Leadership Development Program

### Phase II • Team B – Work-Study Students at VCU: Quality vs. Quantity

#### Team Members

**Denise Branch** Assistant Head, Acquisitions and Serials, VCU Libraries

**Patti Ferguson** Director, VCU Creative Services

**Daniel Park** Budget Analyst, VCU School of Social Work

**Mary Beth Taormina** Assistant Director, VCU Office of Environmental Health & Safety

#### Project Description

After examining the Phase II question assigned to Team B, we determined it had been adequately answered during Phase I and focused on another topic.

VCU Libraries' student full-time equivalents and budget are lower than its peer institutions in the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, resulting in a significant lack of funding for student workers. Team B's initial goals were 1) to identify which steps the VCU Libraries could take to resolve this problem and 2) to investigate if this problem were university-wide in scope. Shortly following this determination, the president's office VCU Update #10 proposed a "substantial increase in funding for student financial aid" and a university-wide survey on work-study was initiated by the VCU Career Center and distributed by the provost to university employers. Team B then adjusted its goals to 1) investigate the student's perspective in obtaining work and the employment experience at VCU and 2) query both students and employers on how to improve the hiring process. Using a questionnaire to survey work-study employers along with experienced and prospective work-study students, Team B collected both quantitative and qualitative data to be used by the university.

#### Project Goals

- Provide support for the presidential initiative focusing on student success by analyzing the student employment experience.
- Collect data and report findings to aid university personnel in making policy decisions on improving the process of hiring work-study students.

#### Project Strategies

Team members determined that a survey would be the best instrument to achieve the following:

- Assess the job-seeking experience of student workers and determine how to improve their job experience.
- Assess the experience of employers that hire student workers and determine areas that could be improved in the hiring process.
- Gain an understanding of the university's role in the success of the student worker's job-seeking experience and make suggestions on how the job search process could be an even more effective tool.

#### Action Steps

1. Chose project from suggestions of each team member
2. Researched current literature and defined scope of project
3. Discussed specific directives of VCU Update #10 from president's office
4. Discussed findings from VCU Career Center university-wide survey of work-study student employers
5. Re-evaluated original project purpose and refocused on new goals

6. Identified contacts and target audience
7. Divided project into manageable tasks
8. Reviewed VCU Institutional Review Board guidelines for applicability in conducting survey
9. Designed survey questions soliciting quantitative and qualitative results
10. Developed both paper and Web-based survey instruments
11. Distributed survey instrument at VCU Federal Work-study Fair
12. Provided access to Web survey to other target audiences
13. Compiled data
14. Discussed findings and analyzed results
15. Extracted observations
16. Developed executive summary and presentation

## Outcomes/Results

The survey consisted of three populations: previously employed student workers; student workers with no previous job experience at VCU; and employers of student workers. These surveys:

- Explored student workers' perceptions of their job-seeking experience.
- Provided suggestions from the students for improving that experience.
- Garnered information from employers on what qualities they look for when hiring student workers.
- Provided suggestions on what could be done to improve the hiring process.

The findings provided insight into the experience of both student workers and employers of the current employment process. The surveys contributed to a better understanding of what students find is helpful and hindering to them in a successful job search.

## Recommendations

Consider suggestions obtained from students and employers on how to improve the process centering on the application, the work-study delivery system (including communication, process and product) and pre-employment coaching.

Embrace recommendations from Huron Consulting Group, especially in the areas of service excellence, teamwork and communication.

## Resources

Additional career center/financial aid staffing

## Conclusions

Phase II project

- A competing agenda exists between VCU work-study program administrators and employers.
- Students develop a different perspective on a variety of issues after obtaining work experience.
- Expectations and opinions of employers and students are at variance on qualitative and quantitative issues.

Class of 2010

- Our team experience reflected a real-life situation that had to be overcome to ensure a successful end result.
- The 10,000-mile checkup occurred at a critical juncture in our process, permitting us to define our strengths, weaknesses and aspirations and to move forward with a unified purpose.
- Overall participant/team satisfaction is relative to the amount of energy and time put into the process.

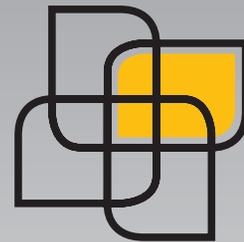
## Process observations

Team B was appreciative of the assistance and cooperation offered by the VCU Career Center staff.

Team B built on the successful dynamic established in the Phase 1 project, which emphasized a democratic decision-making process and recognition of people's strengths and talents. The team faced internal challenges with a non-participatory group member, but overcame them with assistance from GEHLI staff in resolving the issue.

**“... it is of paramount importance that we gain a better understanding of those experiences that may have an influence on a student’s ability to persist in college.”**

Wil Weston  
Understanding the Integrative Role of an Academic  
Library for Undergraduate Student Workers



THE  
**GRACE E. HARRIS**  
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

**VCU** | Virginia Commonwealth University

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## Leadership Development Program

Team B/Phase II

Work-Study Students at VCU: Quality vs. Quantity

# Team members

## **Denise Branch**

Assistant Head, Acquisitions and Serials, VCU Libraries

## **Patti Ferguson**

Director, VCU Creative Services

## **Daniel Park**

Budget Analyst, School of Social Work

## **Mary Beth Taormina**

Assistant Director,  
Office of Environmental Health and Safety

# Project vision(s)

## Initial idea and goals

- Evaluate the VCU Libraries' significant lack of funding for student workers as compared to peer institutions.
- Identify which steps the VCU Libraries could take to resolve this problem.
- Determine if this problem was university-wide.



# Project pivot!

- VCU president's office Update #10 proposed a "substantial increase in funding for student financial aid."
- University-wide survey on work-study was initiated and distributed by the provost to university employers.



# Project goals

- Provide support for the presidential initiative focusing on student success by analyzing the **student** employment experience.
- Collect data and report findings to aid university personnel in making policy decisions on improving the process of hiring work-study students.

# Project strategies

Collect qualitative and quantitative survey data to achieve the following:



- Assess the job-seeking experience of student workers.
- Assess the experience of employers that hire student workers.
- Determine how the job search process could be a more effective tool.
- Determine how to improve the student's employment experience at VCU.

# Action steps

**“Student employment has the potential to be a significant developmental experience for many student workers.”**

Jonathan Lewis

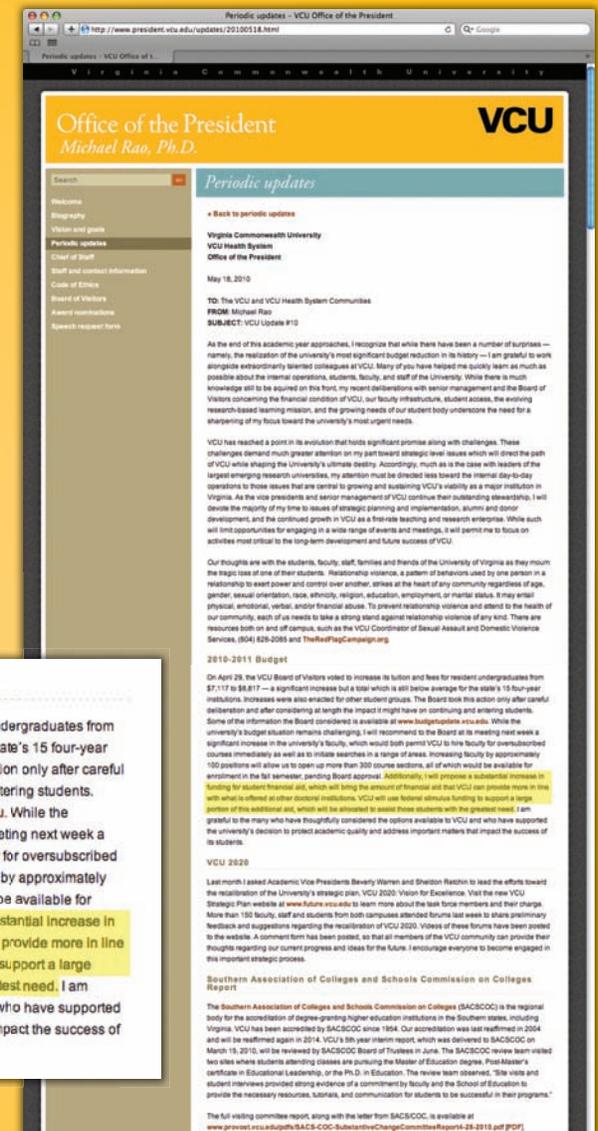
“Student Workers Can Learn More on the Job”

# Action steps

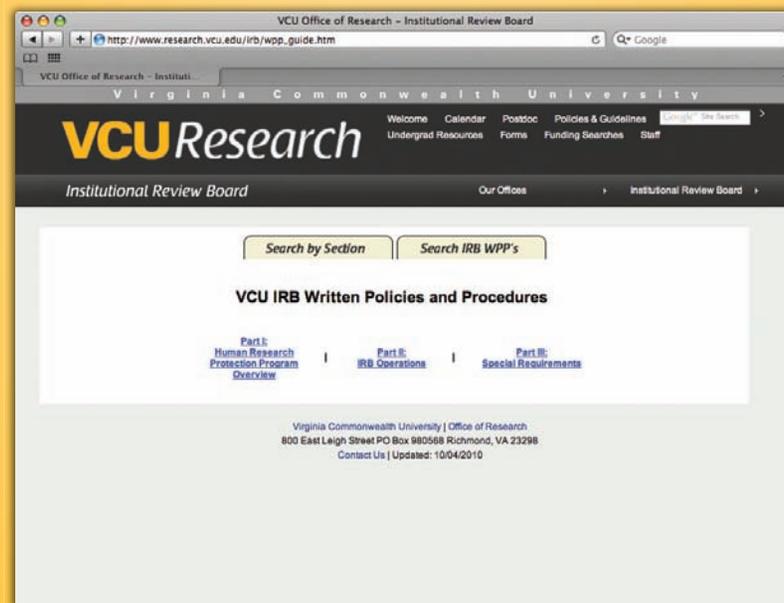
- Chose project from team member suggestions
- Researched current literature and defined project scope
- Discussed specific directives of VCU Update #10
- Discussed findings from Provost's survey

## 2010-2011 Budget

On April 29, the VCU Board of Visitors voted to increase its tuition and fees for resident undergraduates from \$7,117 to \$8,817 — a significant increase but a total which is still below average for the state's 15 four-year institutions. Increases were also enacted for other student groups. The Board took this action only after careful deliberation and after considering at length the impact it might have on continuing and entering students. Some of the information the Board considered is available at [www.budgetupdate.vcu.edu](http://www.budgetupdate.vcu.edu). While the university's budget situation remains challenging, I will recommend to the Board at its meeting next week a significant increase in the university's faculty, which would both permit VCU to hire faculty for oversubscribed courses immediately as well as to initiate searches in a range of areas. Increasing faculty by approximately 100 positions will allow us to open up more than 300 course sections, all of which would be available for enrollment in the fall semester, pending Board approval. Additionally, I will propose a substantial increase in funding for student financial aid, which will bring the amount of financial aid that VCU can provide more in line with what is offered at other doctoral institutions. VCU will use federal stimulus funding to support a large portion of this additional aid, which will be allocated to assist those students with the greatest need. I am grateful to the many who have thoughtfully considered the options available to VCU and who have supported the university's decision to protect academic quality and address important matters that impact the success of its students.



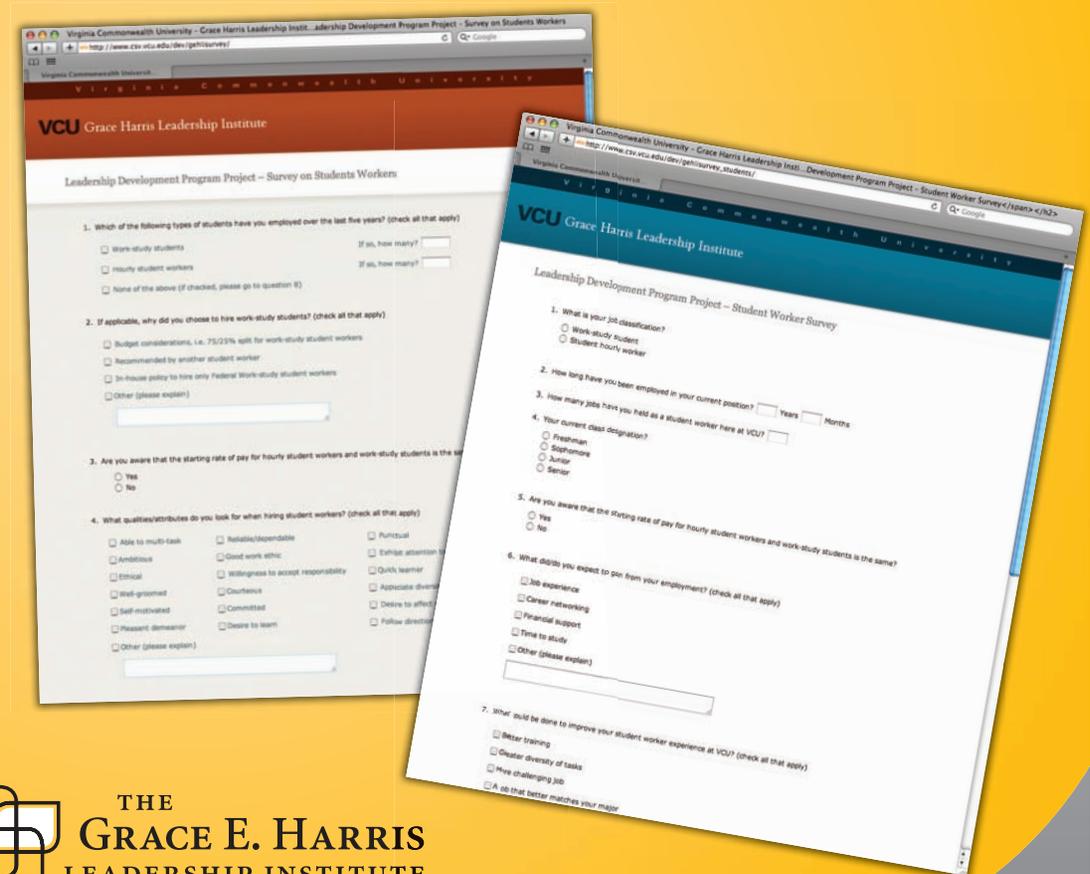
- Re-evaluated original project and refocused on new goals
- Identified contacts and target audience
- Divided project into manageable tasks
- Reviewed IRB survey guidelines



- Designed survey questions
- Developed paper and web-based survey instruments
- Distributed survey instrument at work-study fair



- Provided access to Web survey to other target audiences
- Compiled data
- Discussed findings and analyzed results
- Extracted observations
- Developed executive summary and presentation



# Outcomes/results

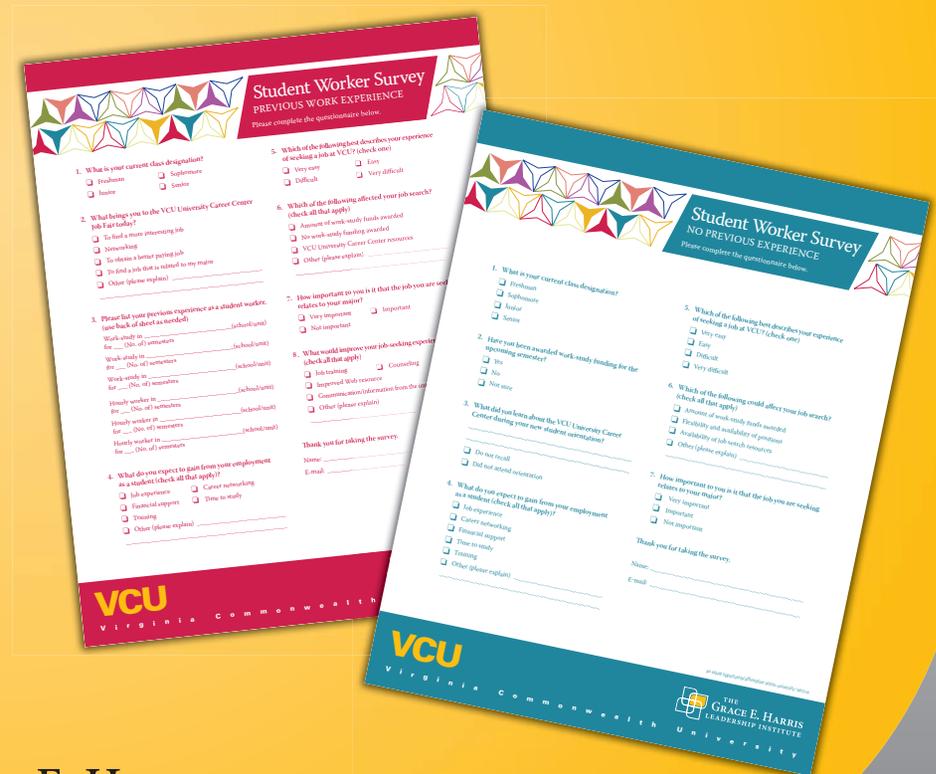
**“... students perform better when they see that the work they do is important and they are recognized as being a valuable part of the organization.”**

Charlene Clark  
“Motivating and Rewarding Student Workers”

# Target audiences

The survey consisted of three populations:

- Student workers with no previous job experience at VCU
- Previously employed student workers
- Employers of student workers



# Students

**“Lessons about life in general.”**

What a Work-Study Fair student  
expected to gain from employment

# Just the stats

## Prospective work-study students from job fair

- 303 out of 602 attendees
- 71% freshmen

## Previously employed students

- Approximately 50 respondents
- 47% senior



# What do/did you expect to gain from your employment?

## Students without work-study experience

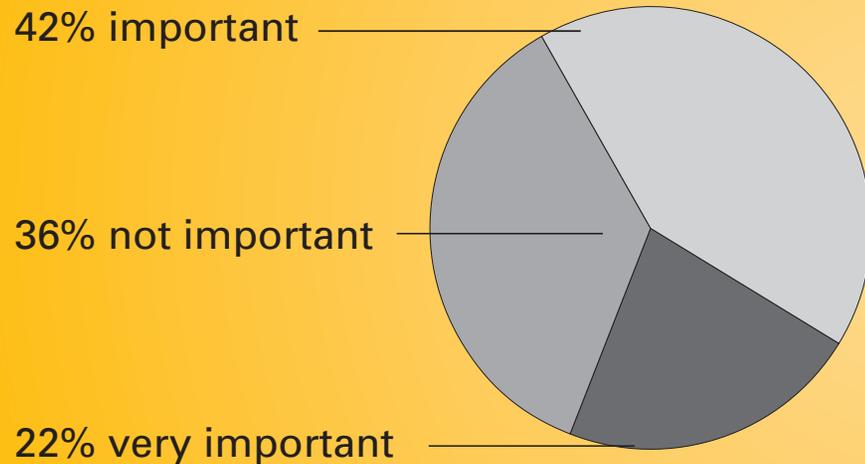
|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Job experience    | 88% |
| Financial support | 84% |
| Career networking | 63% |
| Training          | 28% |
| Time to study     | 38% |
| Other             | 6%  |

## Students with work-study experience

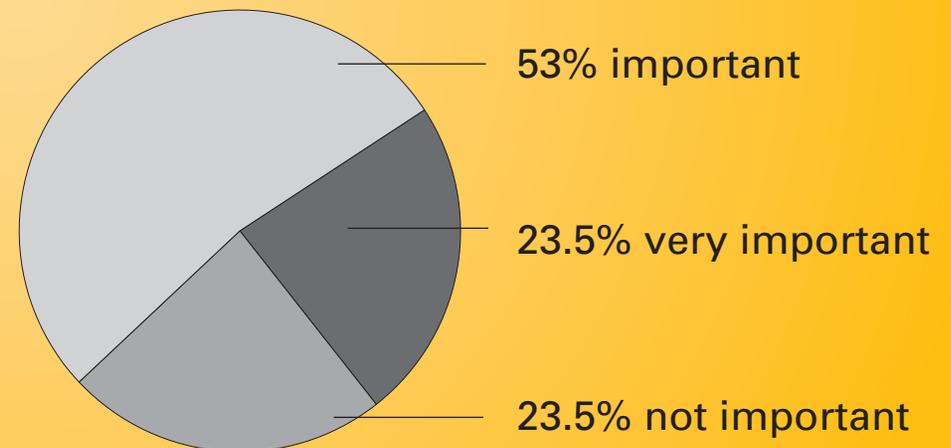
|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Job experience    | 92% |
| Financial support | 86% |
| Career networking | 61% |
| Training          | 54% |
| Time to study     | 17% |
| Other             | 4%  |

# How important to you is it that the job you are seeking relates to your major?

## Students without work-study experience

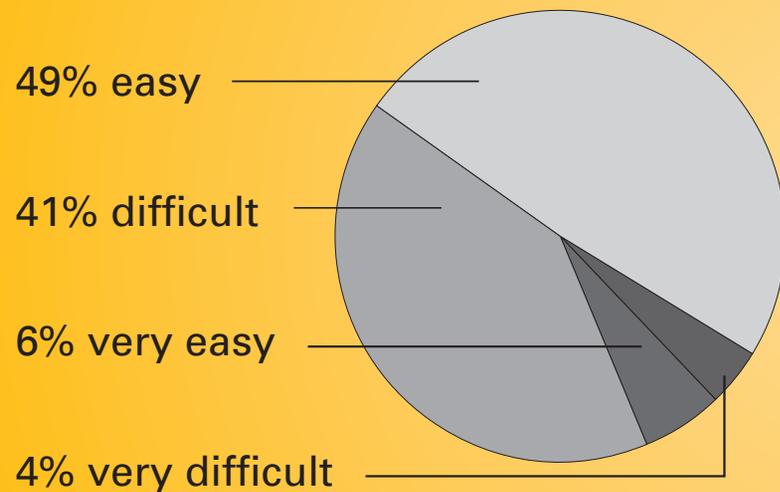


## Students with work-study experience

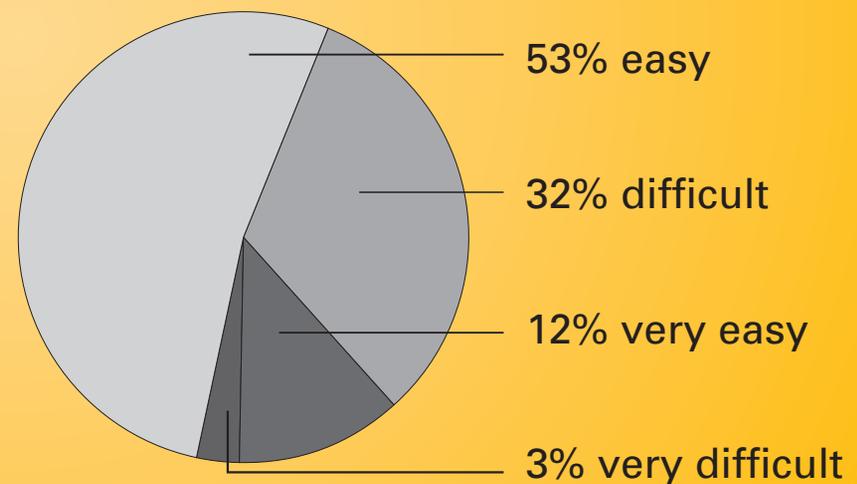


# Which best describes your experience of finding a job at VCU?

## Students without work-study experience

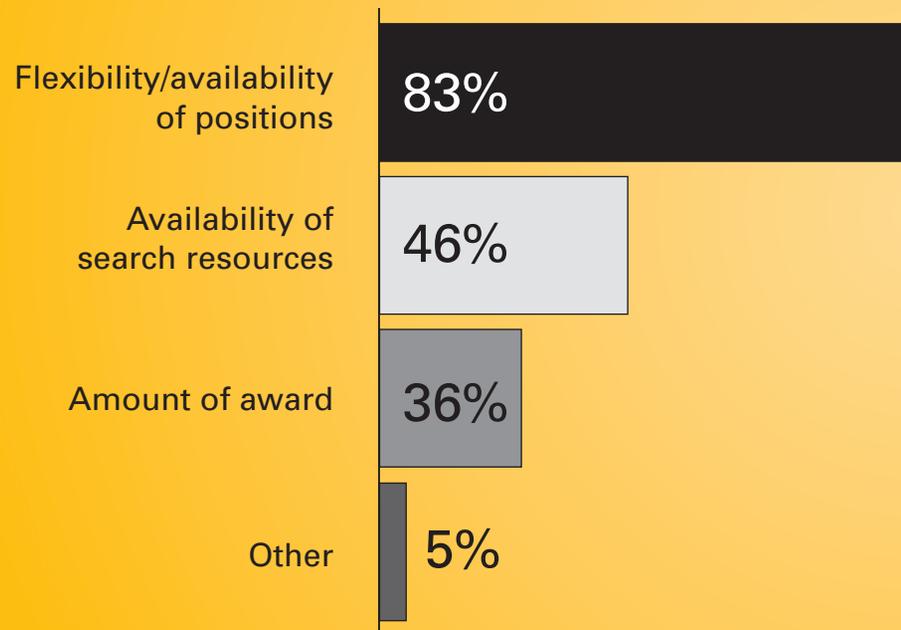


## Students with work-study experience

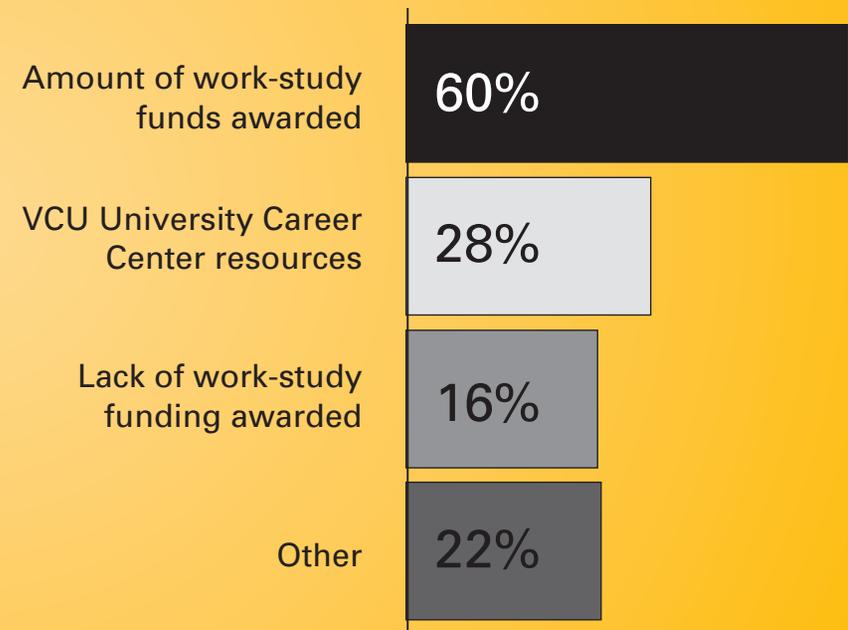


# Which of the following affected your job search?

## Students without work-study experience

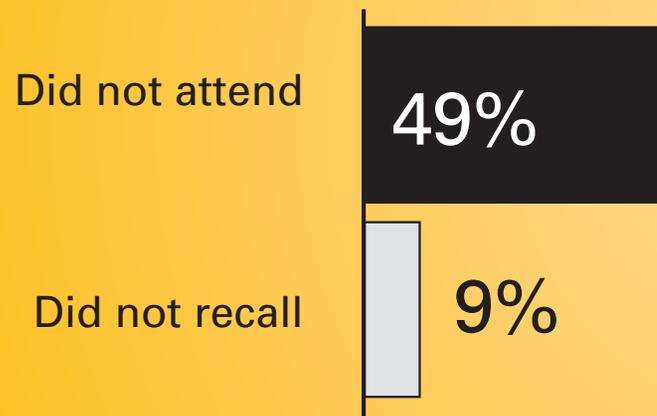


## Students with work-study experience

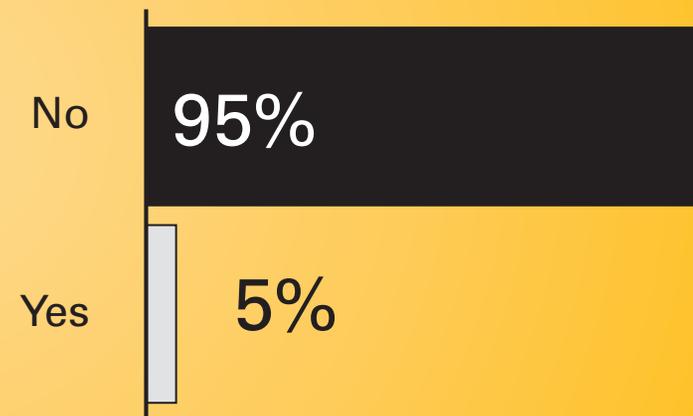


# VCU Career Center

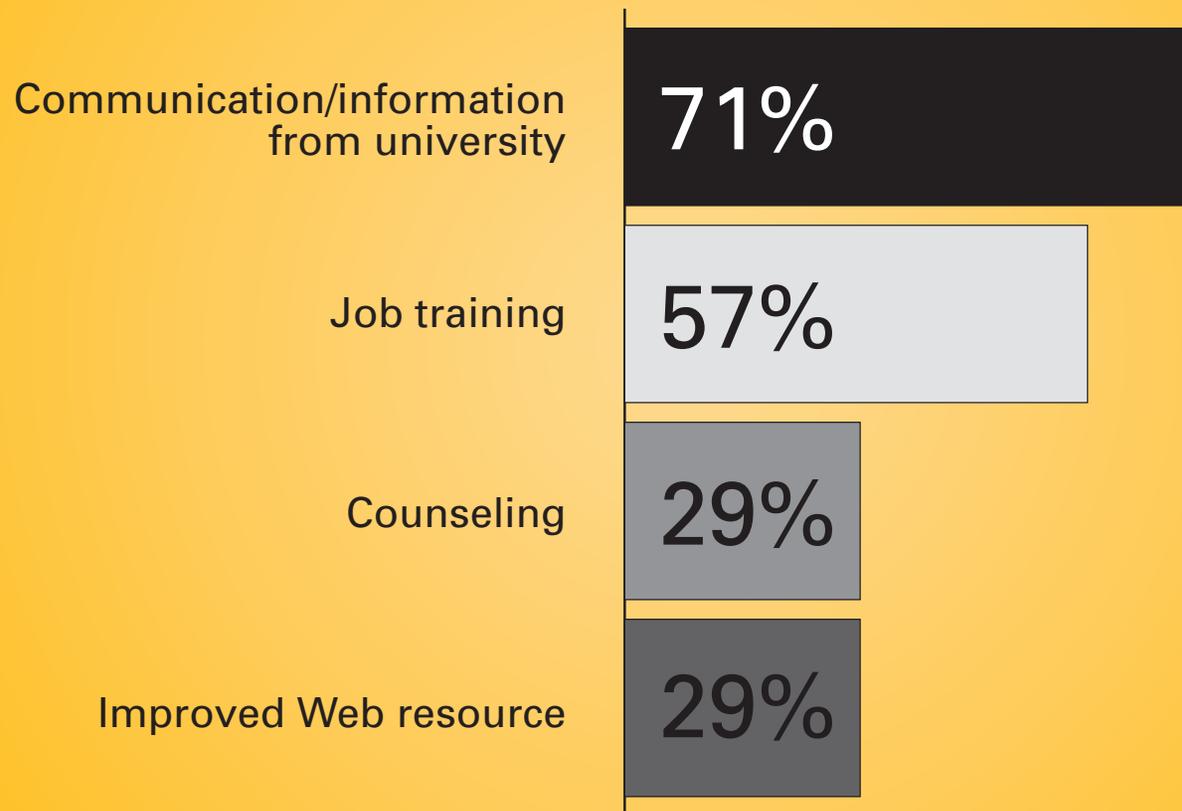
What did you learn at your New Student Orientation?



Did they assist you in finding your job?



# What could be done to improve your job-seeking experience?



# What could be done to improve your employment experience?



# Employers

**“A student’s perspective of employment is often quite different from that of a full-time staff member. Student employees tend to think of themselves as students first and employees second, or even lower on their lists of priorities. Work is usually something they have to do, not necessarily something they enjoy doing or choose to do.”**

Gail Oltmanns  
“The Student Perspective”

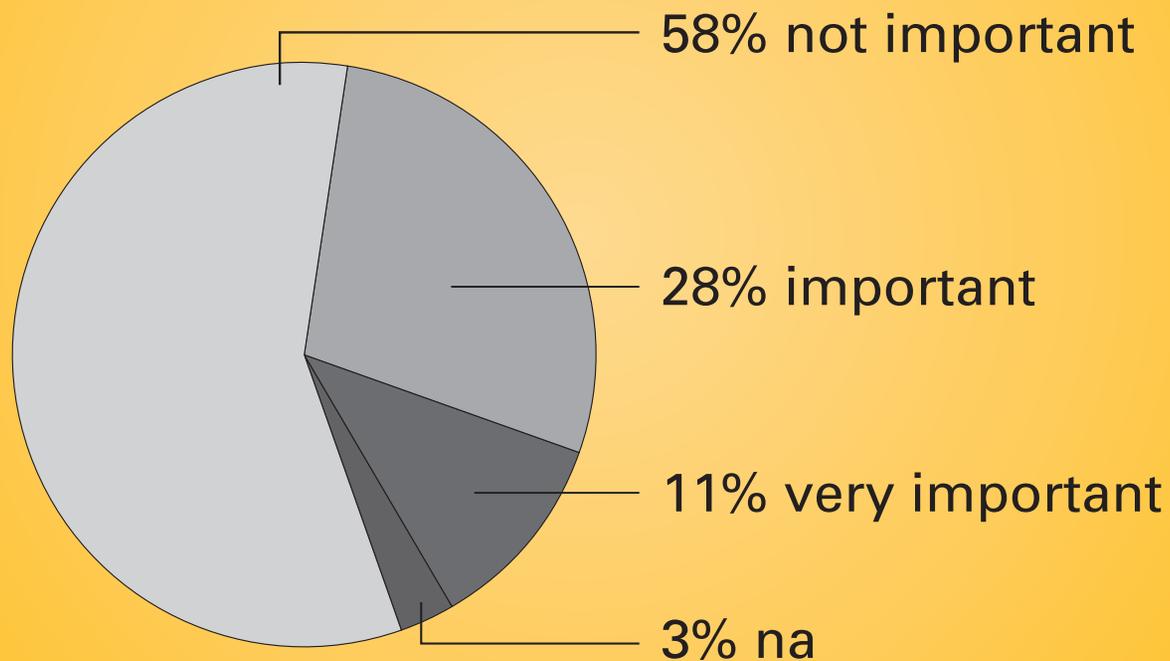
## Just the stats

- Response rate of 67%
- 83% hired both hourly and work-study
- 86% hired students for budget reasons
- 84% would be willing to train them for higher-level duties

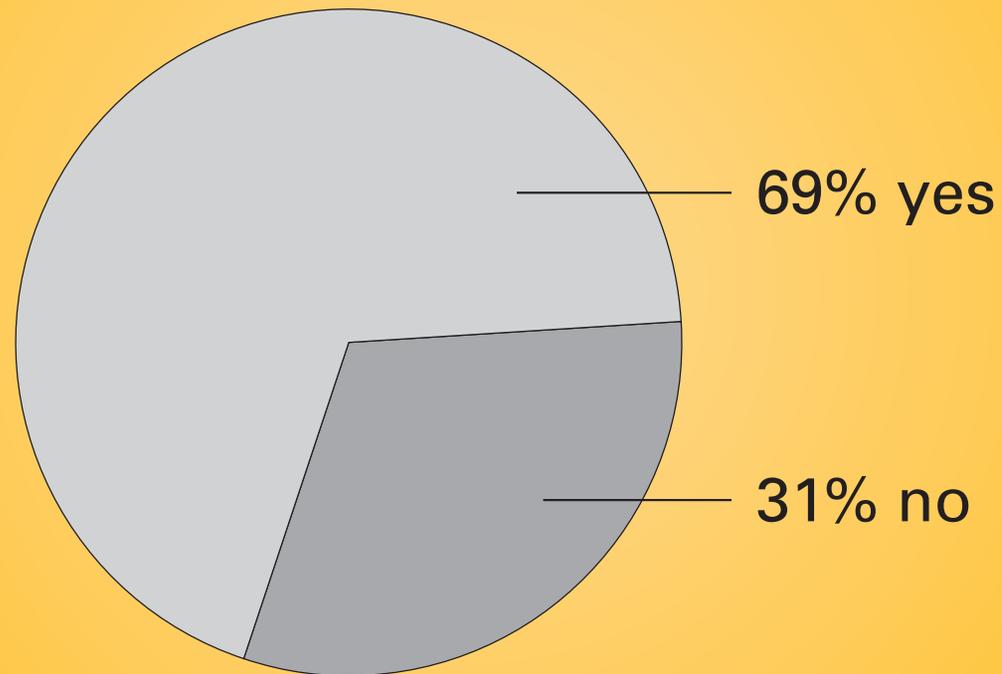
# What qualities/attributes do you look for when hiring student workers?

|                         |     |                                  |     |
|-------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-----|
| Reliable                | 94% | Willing to accept responsibility | 64% |
| Good work ethic         | 92% | Quick learner                    | 61% |
| Courteous               | 83% | Desire to learn                  | 56% |
| Pleasant                | 81% | Ethical                          | 47% |
| Detail oriented         | 78% | Appreciate diversity             | 44% |
| Motivated               | 78% | Committed                        | 42% |
| Punctual                | 75% | Well groomed                     | 36% |
| Follows directions well | 72% | Ambitious                        | 17% |
| Able to multitask       | 64% | Desire to effect change          | 14% |

# How important to you is it that the skill set for the position you are filling relates to the student's major?



# Have you ever had to terminate a student worker's employment?



## Comments

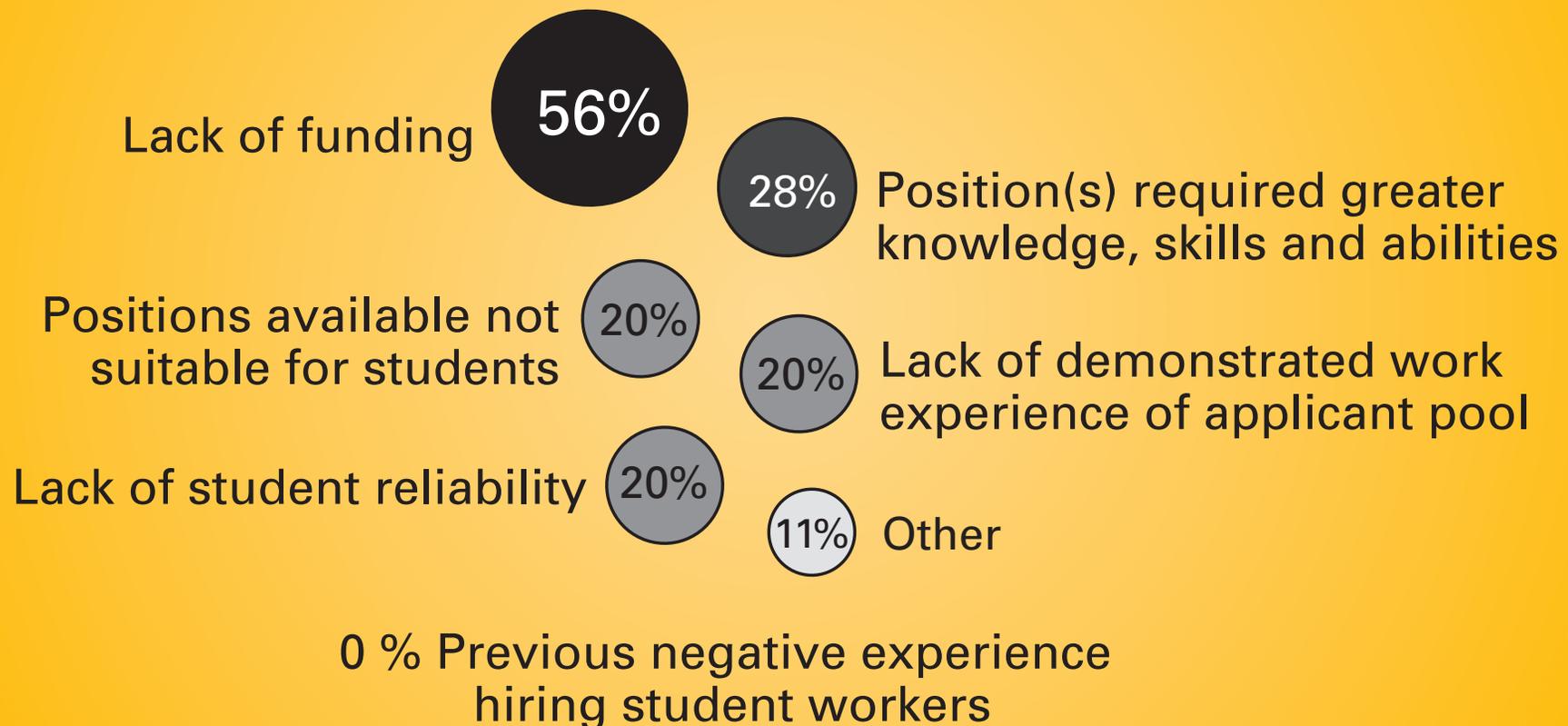
*“Excessive surfing on the Internet, chronically late and not calling in when scheduled to work, busted for pot and could not work, not carrying out assigned tasks.”*

*“The student over time began to use more time Web-surfing and chatting on Facebook than doing assigned work, even after multiple warnings.”*

*“Students falsified time sheet.”*

*“Student did not work well with others. She couldn’t do her work because she was always worrying about what everyone else was doing.”*

## Please check the following reasons that apply for not hiring student workers:



# What could VCU do to improve the student worker hiring system?

## Improve the application process

*"Lack of detail about volunteer or paid work."*

*"Grammatical mistakes."*

*"References should not be friends or family!"*

*"Unprofessionalism; some were not even coherent."*

*"Received over 400 applications for two positions."*

*"Incomplete."*

*"Students applying for a job even though they are not available to work during the times indicated by the job description."*

*“Set up the online application so that some fields are required.”*

*“Include a spell check feature.”*

*“Find out more about a student’s interest in VCU job — what they like to do in a job.”*

*“Include a section where students can list their availability for the semester.”*

# Coaching

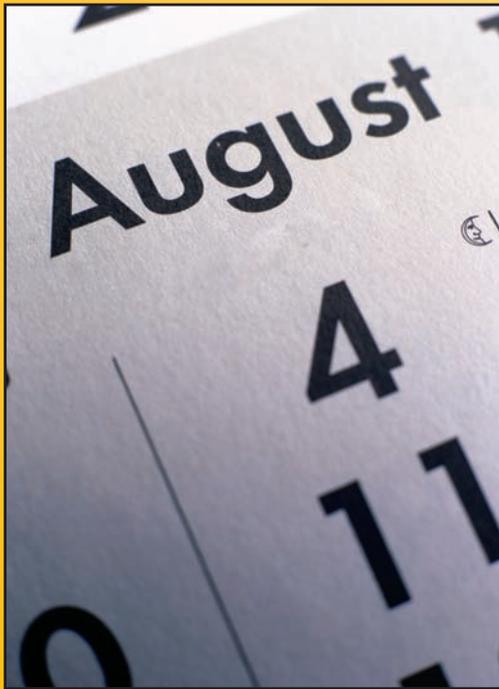
*“Train students on how to interview for a job.”*

*“Provide students with tips on how to be successful at their first job, including coaching on appropriate office/work etiquette and attire.”*



## Delivery system

*“Have students apply around first/second week of August so employers have a current work-study award for hr. This would give us enough time to interview and enough time for hr to process new hires.”*



*“Get the students here earlier. They come looking for work at the start of the semester. That’s too late. I need them 3 weeks before so I can interview, select and then train them.”*

*“More competitive pay.”*

*“Improve lag time between hiring/submitting paperwork and student start date.”*

*“Have more predictable repeat awards for students after first year award. Employers invest training in student staff who may not receive award the next year.”*

# Conclusions

**“Several factors play into keeping the students happy, but it all starts with good recruitment.”**

Maria Bagshaw  
“Keep Your Student Workers”

# Conclusions

## Phase II project

- A competing agenda exists between VCU work-study program administrators and employers.
- Students develop a different perspective on a variety of issues after obtaining work experience.
- Expectations and opinions of employers and students are at variance on qualitative and quantitative issues.

# Recommendations

- Consider suggestions obtained from students and employers on how to improve the process centering on the application, the work-study delivery system (including communication, process and product) and pre-employment coaching.
- Embrace recommendations from Huron Consulting Group, especially in the areas of service excellence, teamwork and communication
- Refocus on the quality of the students and the process.
- Establish task force to include students and employers.
- Add to career center/financial aid staffing to improve the system.



## Process observations

- Team B was appreciative of the assistance and cooperation offered by the VCU Career Center staff.
- Team B built on the successful dynamic established in the Phase I project, which emphasizes a democratic decision-making process and recognition of people's strengths and talents. The team faced internal challenges with a non-participatory group member, but overcame them with assistance from GEHLI staff in resolving the issue.

# Class of 2010

- Our team experience reflected a real-life situation that had to be overcome to ensure a successful end result.
- Overall participant/team satisfaction is relative to the amount of energy and time put into the process.
- The 10,000-mile checkup occurred at a critical juncture in our process, permitting us to define our strengths, weaknesses and aspirations and to move forward with a unified purpose.



**“They aren’t going to walk in and become great.  
You have to teach them how to  
be great professionals.”**

Accounting firm director Richard Berkowitz  
about his “millenials.”