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Title: Working in Dining Services: Just a Paycheck?

About the Author: I am a Senior majoring in English. I worked for almost four semesters at FAR Dining Services. After two semesters I was promoted to the position of student supervisor. For the time that I worked at FAR it was my main extracurricular activity. I dedicated about 12-15 hours of my week to the place even though I never lived in the dorms of FAR. I made a lot of friends there and I feel I learned a lot about myself as a worker while employed there. For the most part, I have fond memories of my time there and when I quit losing the pay check was not my main concern.

Keywords:

Abstract: What do students who work in EBR Dining Services gain from the experience? From personal experience I know that EBR Dining Services has a high turn over rate. There is a select group of students however who choose to work at EBR on a long term basis. I define long term as having worked at EBR Dining Services for four semesters or more. I want to know why these students choose to continue working at EBR rather than quitting within one or two semesters like other workers. Sub-questions designed to help me answer my main research question are as follows: are there noticeable ethnic, gender, or class trends amongst long term workers? What are some of the rituals associated with the student worker culture at EBR? How are relationships amongst the full-time (Champaign-Urbana resident) workers and the student workers? I predict that through ethnographic observations and interviews I will discover that student workers gain much more than a paycheck from their work experience at EBR. I am assuming that the workers are gaining a meaningful interpersonal experience on the job as well, similar to what they might encounter in a close-knit club or organization.

Initial Exercises: Before I came to U of I I didn't think anything of it. I really didn't understand the differences between colleges or universities or take the time to research that information. I was always told that if I wanted to be successful at anything I had to go to college. So I was only concerned with getting into one. The only factoid I knew about U of I was that they tended to accept people who got around a 26 on the ACT and luckily I had scored a 27. Other than that I didn't care where I went as long as I got accepted somewhere and my parents approved.

When I first visited in February 2004 I noticed 'Save the Chief' signs in students' windows. My cousin who had attended U of I for a couple of years in the 80's told me that she was tired of that debate and thought the Chief should be left alone if not protected. I didn't agree with her about

the Chief but I didn't let him bother me too much.

So at the beginning of my U of I experience I was just happy to be in school though I was a little surprised that we still had a racist mascot. Now that I'm a Senior it's hard for me to think of U of I as one unit. I more tend to think of it in parts. For example I feel one way about living in the undergraduate dorms, one way about working in them, one way about living in the Graduate dorms, and a completely different way about the campus police giving me a drinking ticket when I wasn't even drunk. I feel one way about my General Curriculum adviser and another about the English department adviser. I guess I could say that I feel the whole U of I experience to be rather "scatter-brained" because it has so many different departments and offices that students have access to.

I do believe that this campus is full of opportunities for help and guidance, even if you might have to take the effort to reach out for it. I have been surprised by racist events and comments from fellow students but I don't think I've run into any overt racism from faculty. I just take the students as being too immature to hide their racism because I know that people like them litter the entire world, not just the University of Illinois.

Archives Assignment

I was most moved by an oral history interview done with Albert Spurlock. Albert was an African American man that went to the University of Illinois in the 30s. He decided to go to the University of Illinois because he did not want to go to Bradley in Peoria, his hometown. His sister had also gone to U of I. He joined Alpha Kappa Psi Fraternity and started in the Engineering program. There was only one other Black student in the Engineering program. When that student graduated he could not find a job in engineering because he was Black. When Albert saw this happen, he decided to switch his major; after some time he eventually switched back to engineering. Generally Albert was relaxed about school. He mentioned that there was one teacher who wouldn't give any Black student anything above or below a C; Albert joked that it was the only time that he and his studious sister got the same grade.

Albert was aware of racism on campus but did not seem very motivated to combat it. He admitted that he had no White friends but explained that it was because it would be embarrassing to go out to eat with your White

friends and then be barred from the establishment due to Jim Crow practices. He felt that there was nothing he could do about racism then so he simply dealt with it. He managed by joining a Black Fraternity and connecting with Black students in other Universities. Albert seemed to enjoy reminiscing about U of I despite the blatant racism on campus.

Albert's attitude reminded me of my own feelings about the University. I was very calm about the Chief issue and did not let it affect my feelings about the school, though I did judge pro-Chief people as insensitive. I felt either neutral or positive about the school despite the racist mascot because I was mostly motivated by my drive to succeed as an individual. The same goes for these other racist incidents such as the racially themed parties—I know they are bad, but they still haven't tarnished my experience at the school. I am happy in college and when I talk to people about the University I have positive things to say. I've met great people here and that stands out stronger in my mind than the insensitive people I don't know, who throw racially themed parties. I felt a connection to Albert because he accomplished something in the 1938 that many Black students still have a hard time doing today—he earned a degree from a racist institution. I was touched by his sense of humor about the whole thing, and impressed that he hadn't let the overt oppression get him

down.

I do wonder if people like Albert and I help slow the process of change. Maybe if we did not simply relax into our own individual lives and focus on our own progress, we could help the entire community advance faster. I don't know the answer for sure. One could argue that the fact that Albert had a degree in the 30s is a form of progress for the entire community, because he proved what we could do, even when given a sliver of a chance. Hopefully, I will be able to use my own individual success to contribute to the community, even though on campus I've never protested anything---in any fashion. Maybe the fact that I view the University as a fragmented place contributes to my focus on individual rather than community development.

Question: What do students who work at FAR Dining Services for 4 semesters or more get out of the experience?

Plan: --Are there noticeable ethnic, gender or class trends amongst long term workers?

--What are some of the rituals associated with the student worker culture at FAR?

--How are relationships amongst the full-time (champaign resident) workers and the student workers?

Data: My first three interviews were great. I felt like they supported my thesis. I also feared that my questions lead people to give repetitive answers. I felt as if my questions needed to be more probing. My first three interviewees made a very diverse group. Lorenzo was Latino, Young was half white and half Korean, and Jerome was Black. None of them had significant extra-curricular activities. Young mentioned that she didn't do much this semester but that freshman year she was in a rollerblading club. Young spends a lot of time participating in church activities when she is not at work or in class. Jerome said he participated with a group dedicated to keeping young black students on track throughout their first years at FAR but he didn't have many positive things to say about that experience. I believe he said "they are wasting my time though". Lorenzo suddenly became worried that he didn't have enough extra-curricular activities and he named some clubs he belonged to but was not active in. I noticed that the black student admitted that he hung out with many of his coworkers outside of work and the non black students did not. Young did admit that the people at work always tried to make plans outside of work but they never happened. Young was very pleased with the diversity at FAR. She felt that the job allowed her to interact with people she wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to interact with. Jerome joined work for the purpose of making friends as a freshman. He said that for the first few weeks of school he observed the workers and noticed how laid back everyone seemed. He knew it would be a good way to join a small community. All three interviewees cited convenience as one of the reason they chose to begin work at FAR. They all decided to stay because of the raises every year. Jerome emphasized pay more than the others but this could be because of his unique economic situation. He noted that he needed money, and didn't just want it. I interviewed him in his dorm room and he did not have a computer and he mentioned that he would have to get one before he moved out of the dorms. I have not yet read any supplemental academic sources yet but I predict that most sources that deal with student involvement and why students should "get involved" will mention the need to feel a part of the community, leadership skills, and something to help you use your time effectively. Based on these first three interviews I think that students are getting that from working at FAR. Even though they recognize that working is a time sacrifice, I think the sacrifice has a good pay-off.

My fourth interview is a fifth year student who is about to complete her ninth semester working at FAR. Brooke is a black woman. I interviewed her in her dorm room. On the wall above her bed there were 12 pictures. Seven of the twelve photos were of people who worked with Brooke at FAR. One of the 12 pictures was actually taken at work. I was in one of the pictures myself. On Brooke's night stand there was a picture frame designed to hold multiple photos. Two out of those eight pictures were of people from work. The rest were of family and other friends. When I asked

Brooke if she hung out with any coworkers outside of work or if she considered any of her coworkers to be friends, she mentioned three people. These three were not in any of her displayed photos b/c she'd just met them this semester. Most of the people in pictures have already graduated. Brooke repeated again and again, like Young, that she loved her co-workers, that they were "great kids" because most of them are freshman and younger than her. Brooke was very conscious of the fact that she has to miss out on club opportunities and things such as career center events because she has to work. She felt that working at FAR had allowed her to learn how to interact with people of other ethnicities because in her neighborhood at home, it was racially homogenous.

Discuss: Introduction

Like many lower middle class students my parents can not afford to fund my education. Unfortunately for me, my parents make too much money for the government to subsidize my education beyond offering me some paltry loans. The government loans do not even make a dent in the University of Illinois price tag. So I use private loans to pay for the bulk of my education. My freshman year I did not work because my family wanted to make sure that I adjusted to college life and did not fail out of school in the first year. By sophomore year I began to feel anxious about the fact that I was accruing so much debt, partly because I happened to make friends with girls from a higher income bracket whose educations were totally funded by their parents. So I applied for a job in at EBR residence hall at dining services. At the beginning of the semester they were always hiring and at an impressive starting pay rate. I worked there all of sophomore year and quickly made a name for myself getting promoted to Student Supervisor for the next year. During the spring semester of my junior year I began to have emotional difficulties and had to quit my job in order to ensure that my grades did not suffer too much.

After leaving dining services I wanted to join a club or an organization for the first time since I had been at the university. A close friend and I even seriously contemplated founding our own sorority. I began to wish I belonged to the Central Black Student Union and wondered about the Black House which I had never spent much time in. I do not have a lot of close friends of my own ethnicity (African American) and this never really bothered me until I left EBR. I realized that I had been using EBR as not only a job but as a kind of culturally based organization. I missed my friends from work; I missed interacting with all the different types of people.

I have chosen to link my projects to the following archived student research project from the IDEALS website: Sharell Hibbler's *In Which University Spaces are Students Likely to Interact Across Racial Ethnic Lines?*; Ashanti Barber's *Is There an Invisible Boundary Between Races at UIUC (specifically FAR)?*; Josh Rosen's *Student Jobs and Finances*. I chose Hibbler's and Barber's essays because they deal

with issues of racial diversity on campus and I am curious if there are noticeable racial trends in the long term worker group. Also Barber's project deals with issues in a residence hall and my research was also situated in a residence hall environment. Rosen's project relates to mine because it concerns the experiences of student workers as mine does.

Amy Aldous Bergerson's "Exploring the impact of social class on adjustment to college: Anna's story". This article talks about how difficult it is for students of a lower economic status to adjust to the college situation. Bergerson uses the story of one particular student called Anna to illustrate this problem. Anna attended Mountain College and worked at Wendy's to support herself there. At Mountain College "the notion of campus involvement is emphasized both in institutional documents and by staff and faculty" (102). Anna had a lot of difficulty with having to work in order to afford school. She said, "I'm working, but I'm thinking about quitting. I can't handle it. I know I'm missing something. Because people go to activities while I'm at work, and I'm missing out on gaining friends and knowing other people ... it's just kind of hard to get to know people. And that's a reason I'm quitting" (107).

Mary J. Fischer's "Settling into Campus Life: Differences by Race/Ethnicity in College Involvement and Outcomes" focuses primarily on the issue of college involvement for minority students. "Through interactions in the social and academic realms, students either reaffirm or reevaluate their initial goals and commitments. Students who lack sufficient interaction with others on campus or have negative experiences may decide to depart the university as a result of this reevaluation" (126). Also according to Fischer "involvement in activities has been shown by other researchers to have several positive benefits to students ... creating feelings of attachment to the campus for students who participate" (136). Fischer also noted that "the friendships that students form on campus serve to integrate them into campus life, provide companionship, and provide a potentially valuable source of support, advice, and information" (136). For the minority students in Fischer's study "greater involvement in formal social activities, such as school clubs and organizations, was positively related to college grades"(144). Fischer found that "the importance of formal social ties [extracurricular] appears especially strong for Black students" (145).

Research Question

I worked at EBR for almost four semesters, getting promoted in the process. Knowing from first hand experience that the dining hall had a high turn over rate I began to wonder if the other long term employees experienced work the same way that I did. I wondered: what do students who work for four semesters or more at EBR Dining Hall get out of the experience? I wanted to know if there were noticeable ethnic, gender or class trends amongst the long term workers; what some of the rituals of the student worker culture were; and how the relationships amongst

the full-time workers and the student workers manifested. Because of my own experiences I assumed that the workers were getting more than a paycheck from their experiences. I assumed that the students received benefits on the social and emotional level, similar to those one might receive from a club or organization, and that these benefits had a positive impact on their college experiences.

Methodology

To address my research question I conducted interviews; participated and observed in the dining hall of EBR; and participated and observed at a social gathering planned by some of the long term workers of EBR. Before beginning I decided to define "long term worker" as a student who worked at EBR for four semesters or more. To find interviewees I first turned to friends I had made while working at EBR. They were able to suggest other workers that qualified as "long term". I emailed potential interviewees or contacted them on Facebook (a social networking site). I left it up to the participant to decide where they would prefer to conduct the interview. Five of the eight interviews were conducted at the Illini Student Union. The Union was often most convenient because the interviewee and I could meet between classes or immediately after classes without having to travel too far. Two students however preferred to be interviewed in their dorm rooms. One student chose to meet in a coffeehouse.

I created a list of general questions that I asked all of the interviewees though often during the interviews their responses would prompt me to craft questions during the process. The General Questions were as follows: tell me about why you chose dining services over other university jobs; tell me about why you chose EBR over other dining halls; describe the hiring process; what did you expect the job to be like before you started working?; how is the actual experience the same or different from what you expected?; tell me about the atmosphere at work; describe your relationship with management, full-time workers, and other student staff; why have you continued to work at EBR instead of quitting work or switching jobs?; what is the best thing about working at EBR?; what is the worst thing about working at EBR?; is there anything fun that happens on a regular basis at work?; what are some of the traditions of the dining hall?; describe a typical day at work for you; do you hang out with any of your co-workers outside the workplace?; what other extra-curricular activities are you involved in?; how do you feel about race relations at work?; do you find that working is a strain on your academic/social life?; do you find that working benefits you in anyway beyond the paycheck?

Demographic Data

Three of the interviewees were men and five were women. They described their ethnicities in the following ways: three were African American, two were Mexican American, one was Jewish, one was half Korean and half white, and another was

White. Four were juniors and four were seniors.

Trends

While searching for participants I soon noticed that long term workers tended to be students of color. I did not directly ask the students their socio-economic status but 6 of the 8 participants insisted that they worked because they had to work to afford school; two students admitted that they worked because they did not like to ask their parents for money. This trend indicates to me that a major incentive to continue working is the actual need of money, rather than a desire for extra cash. Most interviewees admitted that they chose dining services over other university jobs because of the high starting pay rate. Several expressed that they had looked to other places and could not find a higher starting salary anywhere.

Another trend I found was that 7 of the 8 interviewees initially began working at EBR because they lived there as a resident during their freshman year. One person lived in a fraternity house near the hall. This is different from my own experience because I never lived in EBR as a resident. I chose to work at EBR because my dorm's dining hall had no more shifts available and management suggested I try EBR. All of my interviewees shared similar motives for working at EBR: the impressive starting salary and the convenience of being able to work in or near the place where they lived.

Seven of the eight interviewees admitted that they "hung out" with some of their co-workers outside of the workplace. Lorenzo, the one student who said he did not hang out with co-workers outside of the workplace admitted that he considered some of his co-workers to be his "friends" when asked. Monica said that she spent time with coworkers outside the workplace "maybe like once a month" and that she had friends from work but not "close" friends. Young complained that the workers were always planning to do things together like salsa dancing or bowling but that "it usually doesn't happen"; she then noted with a smile "but I feel like it's going to [soon]".

Brooke, an African American senior answered "yes" quickly when asked if she socialized with co-workers outside of the workplace. Brooke's interview was very interesting for several reasons. For one, she is one of my closest friends at the University of Illinois. I interviewed her in her dorm room and for the first time observed her room with an ethnographer's eye. I had always noticed that she posted pictures of her friends on her walls because frankly, a lot of dorm residents do that. As I studied the photos however I noticed something interesting: more than half of the people in the photos were either dining hall employees at EBR or former employees that had already matriculated. One of the pictures was actually taken in the dining hall while Brooke was working; I saw myself smiling out of one of the photos as well.

Brooke said she counted three people at work as close friends and that two of them were Black women and one was a Malaysian woman. She said that her Malaysian friend took her to a Malaysian dance on campus. With a note of surprise in her voice she said, "Even though I was the only Black person [at the dance] I had a lot of fun".

Jerome, a junior, not only asserted that he hung out with co-workers outside of the workplace but also that part of his reasons for working at EBR was to find friends in the first place. Before he applied for a job there he would eat his meals in the dining hall and observe the workers. I found this amusing considering the observing I planned to do the next time I ate at EBR. He said he noticed the "laid back" environment and that the workers seemed to have "fun on the job" and that he would "make more friends" if he worked there.

Noah a supervisor and a senior noticeably perked up when I asked about socializing with coworkers. He cheerily explained that he usually met up with Monica while partying and that he had gone salsa dancing with Young. He also said he played racquet ball once a week with another employee that he did not name. Caitlin, a junior, said that she saw her coworkers around a lot because many of them were residents and her other job is that of being an R.A. in EBR. "Some of us are friends ... we actually go out and do things" she added.

Sharon, an African American senior and supervisor at EBR affirmed that she socialized with coworkers outside of work and added ironically that she met her "interviewer" (myself) at work and then proceeded to invite me to a slumber party at her apartment. The guest list consisted entirely of current or former EBR workers.

Five of the eight interviewees did not have heavy extracurricular involvement. Lorenzo, a junior, had to dig deep into his memory to think of any club for which he had ever attended a meeting or two; in the middle of admitting with some embarrassment that he had some affiliation with the Horticulture Club he was suddenly struck with a revelation: "Shit!" he exclaimed, "I need to do more". Lorenzo was responding to the ever present pressure on an undergraduate campus "to get involved". Jerome participated in a culturally based organization but did not seem very enthusiastic about it. "They're wasting my time ... I haven't been [to a meeting] in two weeks," he explained. Young said that she spent a lot of time doing church activities but that starting this year she had participated in less clubs than she had in previous years. When I asked Brooke if she participated in any extra-curricular activities she became very obviously bothered and said, "None". Before I even asked her about extracurricular activities she told me that the worst thing about working at EBR was the way it took up her time. She named a few clubs that she had tried to join but said finally that they "didn't work out" with her work schedule. She actually pulled a post it note from her desk and waved it at me vehemently saying, "See, here is something I wanted to do to, but I had to work!" Brooke was the only student that explicitly complained of work getting in the way of

extracurricular activities but I think that the fact that more than half of the interviewees had a hard time thinking of extracurricular activities they were involved in, and the fact that the three who listed several organizations they worked with admitted to never getting much sleep indicates that work does interfere with extracurricular involvement.

I asked all of the interviewees explicitly if their job had any benefits besides the paycheck because this is really the heart of what I wanted to find out. All except Noah admitted that work benefited them in ways beyond the paycheck. Noah could only say that because of the job "my wallet likes me". Aside from Noah there were two types of responses to this question. The first response I will call the Resume response and the other I will call the Personal response. Three people gave the Resume response. Lorenzo said, "Yeah, duh, being a supervisor ... in the future you will eventually need to know how to be a leader ... I have a leadership [position] and good [sources for] recommendation letters." Jerome confidently said that his work experience would build his resume because it shows that he has "dedication" and that he "can stick with something for a while". Sharon playfully responded that her work experience would be a "nice resume builder ... grades aren't so great but damn I do a lot!"

The other four responses were of the Personal variety. Caitlin's response had an ironic edge to it; she out of all the other interviewees seemed to feel the most stress from the job. She admitted that the worst thing about working at EBR was that sometimes the stress followed her home because she is a person for whom stress is "physical". So I am not surprised at how she feels her work experience will benefit her: "[Work gives me] good experience for the real world ... all the crap I'm gonna have to deal with eventually."

When I asked Monica if work benefited her in non-monetary ways she immediately said yes but when I asked her why she became quiet and reflective for a moment then said: "Because, um, I can be a pushover sometimes but [the job] has helped me not be such a pushover and take charge more". Young said that the job benefited her because "you get to know people you wouldn't normally". Young was very enthusiastic throughout the entire interview about why she loved working at EBR: the people. One of the things she loved about "the people" was that they were all from such different backgrounds. She described the atmosphere as "diverse". She said she thought it was "cool" that people from different backgrounds could share their experiences with each other. So the main benefit of her job was exposing her to people she would otherwise not spend much time around. She also noted that working helped her practice her patience and admitted that sometimes she prays before work in order to have more patience while on the shift. I could barely believe it when she told me this because Young is one of the sweetest and most genuine people I have ever met and I could never imagine her losing patience over anything.

Brooke also brought up the theme of diversity in her response. She said that she

gained a lot of "people experience" from work and "learned a lot about [herself] just from dealing with conflict and people of different ethnicities". She explained that because she was from a racially homogenous neighborhood in Chicago that she had never had much exposure to ethnicities different from her own before college.

At this point I would like to note the demeanor of the participants as I interviewed them. The interviews were typically filled with a lot of laughter and anecdotes about what I had missed since I left work. Several times one of the interviewees would say something and then say, "You're not going to write that down are you?" indicating that they would slip out of speaking to me like an interviewer and begin to talk to me as a friend. They often would not have to complete their sentences or would trail off with a "you know" because frankly, on some things, I do know. I could commiserate with many of their frustrations as well as their pleasant feelings about work. Their body language and word choice when talking about the atmosphere at work and the people at work, often indicated a positive attitude. I would ask them if anything fun happened at work on a regular basis and they might say no at first or pause to think, and then suddenly start laughing. When I would ask them sometimes they would be unsure if what they were thinking of would be relevant, but really, what they were talking about were some of the rituals of the student worker culture at EBR. I will share those stories now.

Rituals

One ritual that became apparent was the dish room ritual. The dish room is an area hidden from the student customers. As the name suggests this is where the dirty dishes are cleaned. The dish room ritual involves engaging in behavior to pass the time that would not be possible while working out in the serving areas. When I asked Lorenzo if there were anything fun that happened at work on a regular basis he replied: "goofing off in the dish room, dancing to 'Souljah Boy'" he became thoughtful then said, "dancing [in the dish room], that's probably fun. That's really fun actually!" Monica gave a similar observation saying that in the dish room "when workers feel like being silly they'll bust out dance moves". Young mentioned a different type of dish room fun. She said that the workers on her dish line shift would compete to see who could create something "pretty" out of the food. She happily noted that she had won the most recent contest.

Young also brought up another EBR dining services ritual which I have labeled the Work/Talk circuit. All of the interviewees except for Caitlin admitted that talking and socializing was a big part of their work experience. Young said that a typical day at work for her included checking to make sure that everything was in order, talking to her friends and repeating that cycle until the shift ended. Jerome said that a typical work day for him included mostly doing work and socializing with people he had not seen in a while; he noted that socializing naturally subsided when it was necessary for work to be done. Sharon told me that "getting to talk to [her] co-workers who[m] [she] gets to see only once or twice or week" was a fun event that

happened at work on a regular basis. Noah also cited conversations with co-workers as a fun ritual of EBR; he described his typical work day as follows: "I clock in ... make sure everyone does their work, talk to people, clock-out and leave". Sharon described her typical work day in a similar fashion: "I eat [before the shift begins]. I talk. Make sure everything is done ... Do my paperwork and go home. Life ... it ain't easy".

One thing that "ain't easy" about working at EBR is dealing with the behavior of the student customers. Complaining about the perceived outrageous behavior of the customers is another ritual connected to the student worker culture of EBR. In the midst of explaining that the worst thing about working at EBR was simply "going to work" Sharon trailed off into an anecdote about a student that "had the nerve" to ask her for brown sugar. I could not help but laugh at her annoyance because I myself had been there many times. One incident that comes to mind is a resident insisting that I sell her a loaf of bread; of course this was impossible, the dining halls do not sell things like that but the girl insisted by waving a five dollar bill in my face saying "I have money so why can't you sell me the bread?" It's funny now but it was supremely frustrating at the time having to be respectful to that rude underclassmen.

Monica expressed irritation at the fact that students would sometimes complain that the workers did not work enough. She said: "If everything's clean and re-filled, why do [the students] want us working harder?" Jerome even said that the worst thing about working at EBR was "customer complaints ... I never worked at a job with so many complaints" he finished angrily and with only a hint of hyperbole. Complaints are left in a comment box placed near the entrance to the dining hall. When I asked Lorenzo what the best thing about EBR was he said "the people" but quickly amended "not the people but the workers" so that I perfectly understood that the student customers were not the best thing about EBR. His tone of voice indicated the opposite in fact. I remember that the managers were always concerned that we were not standing around talking and that we made it a priority to find something to do even if it appeared that all the work was done. Management's desire to have it appear that the student staff is always working is probably in response to complaints filed by residents who feel that dining services workers do not work hard enough for the money they are paid.

Everyone knows our salaries because they post the starting rate up on the glass doors of the entrance to entice new applicants every semester. Students have the impression that their tuition goes toward our salaries and I guess that makes them feel that we should provide perfect service to them. I had friends that were residents of EBR while I worked there and they honestly felt that our job was too easy and that there was no excuse when things would go wrong. Unfortunately I know how hard the job can be. There were a lot of times when there would be time to socialize but when it got busy, things could get really stressful. Like Caitlin, I would sometimes go home from work only to find that I was really exhausted and still tense. Similarly, the one thing that surprised Brooke about what it would be like to

work at EBR, was how much work she actually had to do. She said she had not expected it to be so difficult.

Participation/Observation

Eating in the Hall

In order to participate and observe I added points to my I-card and swiped into EBR dining hall for a few evening meals. I was able to observe the workers in the work environment as a student customer. Sitting in the dining room facing the serving areas gave me an excellent view of the employees as they worked and interacted. The only area left out of sight was the dish room. The dish room is located in the back area where the offices are located and the cooking is done; these areas are kept out of view from the dorm residents. In order to "participate" I could only engage the employees in conversation as they worked. This was quite easy because as a former employee myself, many of the veteran workers knew me. I was greeted eagerly by student staff and full-time staff that had known me as an employee there. Several people asked: are you coming back to work? In the process of observing during one of the evening meals I was invited to a gathering that a group of the workers were organizing: an EBR bowling night at the Union. I used this as another opportunity to observe.

I got to observe first hand some of the rituals of EBR when I went in as a customer. The Work/Talk circuit was in obvious affect. Because most of the staff members that were not newly hired this semester either remembered me or are actually my friends a lot of people were interested in why I was there. Now that I have my own apartment I usually do not eat in the dining halls so my presence there was unusual. Anyway, many workers came up to start conversations with me, eagerly asking how I had been since I left work. But the conversations could hardly get started without the student worker having to excuse himself in order to do, well, work. I would stand there awkwardly for a minute until the worker would swing back around to me and complete the circuit.

It was not just the student workers that were interested and happy about my appearances at EBR. Fulltime workers warmly welcomed me as well. Fulltime workers are usually Champaign-Urbana residents. As indicated in the interview responses interactions between fulltime workers and the part time student workers appeared to be positive. I include management in the full-time worker category. Most interviewees indicated that relationships with management ranged from neutral to very good; but when there was tension between management and student staff it seemed to really have an impact. This impact could obviously just be the result of the boss/employee dynamic, where one has power over the other and therefore the stakes of a conflict are raised for the subordinate.

Bowling at the Union

I was invited to a bowling get together organized by some of the older employees of EBR. There were about 20 of us there total and we took up three lanes. The group was diverse in several ways. Racially it was mostly African Americans, but White, Asian, and Latino ethnic groups were represented as well. There were slightly more females than males. There were upperclassmen as well as several freshmen that were new to the staff. Some of the workers brought other friends. I noticed that the groups tended to divide along gender lines: one lane was predominantly female, one male, and one relatively mixed. Two ex-employees were present myself among them. I was shocked at the age diversity apparent; having been heavily invested in thinking about the experiences of long term workers I did not think about the new freshmen workers much at all. Upon reflection I now predict that the freshmen who have been absorbed into the long term worker group will more than likely be the long term workers of upcoming years.

Conclusion

Many academic sources indicate that working disadvantages students. Students who are forced to work, particularly off campus, have difficulty adjusting to college because they have less time for campus involvement (107). Apparently for minority students involvement in campus life greatly increases their chances of success in school (145). I have found that the long term workers I interviewed and observed for this project have found a happy median. Like many students they find themselves having to work in order to afford school and for most of them, their work does hinder their extracurricular involvement; however, their investment in ERB and their relationships with each other serves in a sense to help them connect to their campus and find their niche. I think it is definitely a good thing that the university reserves those positions for students needing part time work.

EUI Links: <http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/bitstream/2142/1815/2/Identity%20%26%20Social%20Space.pdf>

<http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/bitstream/2142/1862/2/Research%20Process.pdf>

<http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/bitstream/2142/1900/2/Research%20Process.pdf>