



Weighing the Workload: Are On-Campus Jobs Worth It?

story by **Gunner Stuns & Morgana Carroll** | photos by **Lily Beck** | design by **Lizeth Valdes**

In 2023, CWU sent out a basic needs survey to record how students felt about their living conditions. The results of the survey include the statistic that 58% of students who took the poll report feeling some kind of food or housing insecurity, 9% above the state average.

Dealing with the cost of living as a student isn't always easy, and many find themselves searching for jobs on-campus; as a quick and efficient way to handle these expenses. But, recent events may have students questioning that option.

In January, Student Leadership, Involvement & Community Engagement (SLICE) fired six student employees without prior notice, then hired them back nine days later, according to reporting in *The Observer*. This came on the heels of an outcry on campus last year about the university's handling of Title IX cases. Partly in response to these publicized issues, students came together last September to launch a union for student employees.

PULSE spoke with six student employees, both current and former, including people with first-hand experience in

these cases. Three of them are involved with the newly-formed Working Wildcats Union. PULSE also spoke with CWU's Vice-President of Human Resources, Staci Sleigh-Layman, and CWU's Director of Dining Services, Dean Masuccio.

The accounts of these people help to explain the bad rap on-campus jobs may have had in recent years, and to answer one question: are on-campus jobs worth it?

Students Need Jobs

Dexter Seuberlich, a third year history major and catering kitchen coordinator, said he took an on-campus job for financial reasons. "I got the job originally because I wanted to help my family out," Seuberlich says. "I think that's why most people [pursue] the job." Prior to taking a position with Catering, Seuberlich had worked with Housing and Residence Life as a resident assistant (RA). When asked to clarify why he became an RA, Seuberlich states that students search for jobs on-campus because, for many, that income is a necessity.

"Most people aren't like, 'Oh, that sounds like a perfect career for me,'" Seuberlich says. "It's usually for economic reasons."

Beyond the need for money, there are other reasons why jobs on-campus are attractive to students. Mason Saulsbury, a fourth year film major and former employee of CWU's Diversity and Equity Center (DEC), says convenience is a major factor.

"I needed a job and wanted something that accommodated my schedule and wasn't too far from where I lived," Saulsbury explains. "I should probably have money for groceries, especially since I'm living on my own now."

For students without a reliable source of transportation or who are struggling to find a position elsewhere that accommodates their workload and classes, there are few options outside of on-campus jobs that can meet those requirements, students say.

However, while it may not seem as obvious, there are certain jobs around campus that will allow you to get some experience in the field you're studying. This is the case for Saige Johnson, graduate student and head writing tutor at CWU's Learning Commons.

"I started looking for jobs for the experience, as well as to start making money for the summer," Johnson says. Though she considers the experience valuable, Johnson also acknowledges that, like Seuberlich, her job search was

economically motivated. "My first year of college was covered, but not much beyond that, so I needed the money to keep supporting myself," Johnson adds.

Working Wages

Financial compensation is arguably the most important factor for a student choosing to work on-campus, especially if they aren't receiving support elsewhere. According to the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, minimum wage is set at \$16.28 per hour of work. With the rate of inflation and rising cost of living, is this enough to live on?

For Seuberlich, the answer is a resounding no. "I'd say at the end of the day, it's nowhere near enough to survive for a lot of people." He acknowledges that the amount of hours you get can shift around and change, and CWU students are limited to a maximum of 20 hours per week in an on-campus job.

The main concerns that Seuberlich points out lie with the expenses of rent, which he feels is more than some students can manage. Seuberlich cites that he considers himself fortunate to share an apartment with his girlfriend and another couple, meaning his rent is only \$300 a month.

"Most people are paying \$500 to \$600 a month," Seuberlich says. "Some months, with how work pans out, I'm getting \$700 a month. If I was in that [situation], how the hell am I paying rent?"

"If it's not enough to survive, no, it's not fair," Seuberlich says.

However, the situation can be different depending on where a student works and what job they have. Johnson, for instance, not only considers her wage fair but also considers herself fortunate because she says that the Learning Commons is very communicative and clear about wages.

"It's very transparent, the wages and the payscale at the Learning Commons," Johnson says. "They have made a very conscious effort to make sure that at the beginning of every quarter it's clear what you're supposed to be paid." Johnson goes on to state that she has

never had any problems receiving her payment, nor is she aware of any of her coworkers at the Learning Commons having that issue.

This is far from a universal experience, however. When asked how she felt about her wage, former DEC employee Saulsbury expressed some conflict over whether or not she was paid fairly for her work.

"It's not like it's a livable amount," Saulsbury says. "It's minimum wage. I could never pay back any [student debt] with the amount of money I was being given for the work I was doing."

Saulsbury also feels that she was given a lot of work to do running the DEC's social media, promoting events and getting word out about the DEC. While Saulsbury understands that she may not have the best idea of how much her labor was really worth, it's hard for her to deny that she felt it was too little.

"I would've loved to live on it, but I couldn't," Saulsbury states.

Olene Togiailua, a third year studying sociology, women's gender and sexuality studies and working as an apartment manager in Anderson Hall, says that he doesn't think he is adequately compensated for his work.

"Even though I work as much as I can and do as much as I can, looking at my fridge, and my bank account, [I'm] trying to quantify why is it that I can't afford to eat?" Togiailua says. "Why is it that my peers can't afford to eat? Why is it that the school needs to have a food pantry?"

Mismanagement

As reported by PULSE's sister publication, *The Observer*, earlier this year, "On Jan. 2, six SLICE (Student Leadership, Involvement & Community Engagement) employees were sat down in front of an audience of their peers and unabashedly told by organization director Veronica Pettigrew that their services were 'no longer needed.'"

The firing of these six employees sent waves through the world of student employees, and almost immediately caught the attention of



the Working Wildcats, CWU's budding student workers' union.

Danielle Hegarty, graduate student, history major and member of the Working Wildcats, recounts the situation with SLICE.

"It was a non-mandatory training meeting before school started [for the quarter]," Hegarty says. "They went through four hours of training and then at the end, their supervisor read off a list of names and said those people were fired. Again, this was before the quarter started, so students had come back assuming that they had a job, and then all of a sudden [they were] unemployed."

According to Hegarty, their organizer brought this information to the rest of the Working Wildcats, who felt that

the firings were unfair and arbitrary. The Observer's article goes into further detail, stating that "the reason for termination was 'department budget, accessing programmatic needs, consultation with staff members, and grade point average.'"

Hegarty details what the Working Wildcats did to help out with the situation. "We created a petition that was also an open letter to administration, and I think 325 signatures later, within two weeks, they all had their jobs back like that."

The open letter drafted by the Working Wildcats criticized the firings. The letter cites the firings' "arbitrariness, the 'far above average GPAs' of the victimized employees and the distribution of the former employees' shunted projects as indicating that the 'process was not well reasoned, planned or thought through.'" After receiving hundreds of signatures from students, alumni, community members and even some staff, the petition would eventually result in the reinstatement of all six fired SLICE employees.

The SLICE situation is far from the only case in which management has been criticized in campus workplaces.

Johnson claims she faced discrimination from her former University Writing Center Coordinator. "Back in 2022 and 2023 there was a Title IX investigation happening against my former employer, Jared Odd," Johnson says. "There were investigations [into] gender and sex discrimination, ableism and religious discrimination in the workplace."

According to the Jan. 18, 2023 edition of The Observer, the investigation resulted in a 33-page report which officially determined that Odd was responsible for discrimination on the basis of sex and gender identity.

"He had some transphobic views and made some [negative] comments about things like pronouns and identity. As someone who has transgender siblings and family members, that's something that I felt personally affected by," says Johnson.

Following the investigation, Odd's employment was terminated and he was replaced by a new Writing Center coordinator, according to The Observer. Johnson indicates that she's never had an issue with the new coordinator nor witnessed any of her coworkers being mistreated by them.

However, replacement may not always

be the ideal solution. Saulsbury says her issues with DEC management could very easily have been solved with more clear and honest communication. Saulsbury, who says she has been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), says she was fired from her social media position with DEC at the end of the 2023 spring quarter because of tardiness.

"I was having trouble showing up exactly on time for work. I was usually five minutes late," Saulsbury says, admitting her firing was "totally fair." But while she understands why she was let go, Saulsbury takes issue with how the situation was communicated to her by management, especially when she had dialogue with them about her ADHD diagnosis.

"We had previously talked about it, and I thought that I was doing very well to meet them on their terms," says Saulsbury. "Then, on the last day of school, they brought me in and told me they wouldn't bring me back."

Saulsbury says she feels that more direct communication would have allowed her to correct these issues and would have led to her firing feeling a lot less sudden. A representative from DEC told PULSE that Saulsbury's hiring and letting go process was the same as any other student's, and he underscored that Saulsbury herself said that the firing was fair.

Understaffed & Undertrained

KB Brown, who goes by KB, is a senior studying theater education and a former server working in SURC dining. They say they hadn't heard many negative comments beyond some complaints about scheduling. However, KB says that they did struggle with a lack of training once hired.

"I was opening [Eggs and Co.] by myself," KB says. "And I had never worked at that station while they were serving the stuff they were serving that day. So that was a little bit deeply confusing. And sometimes people are there to train, but you only have one or two people working at a station that usually has three to four people. I understand that it's difficult to schedule training in a way where that doesn't happen. But it's still a problem."

KB says that understaffing has been an issue for as long as they have worked in Dining. "Typically, from my experience, it's more of an issue near the beginning of the quarter. Then throughout the quarter, generally more people will start working and that becomes less of an issue as the quarter goes on," KB says. "But it is a problem."

According to Director of Dining Dean Masuccio, there are parts of the year when Dining faces a lull in staffing. "[The] beginning of quarters are typically the period of time where you

might experience a little bit more of the short handedness, lack of staffing, etc.," Masuccio says. "Fall quarter being probably the largest experience that you would see that occurring. We try to compensate as much as we can with other staff, and we're putting some strategies in place that will help... us grow from the prior year."

Masuccio also says that Dining is still bouncing back from the staff shortage created from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Masuccio, Dining averages 350 student employees, but in the academic year of 2021, they ended the year with a third of the student staff they would normally have. Masuccio estimates from 2021 to now that Dining is in the ballpark of two thirds of the student positions filled.

Concerning the lack of training KB mentioned, Masuccio says, "That shouldn't be occurring. If it is occurring, that shouldn't be the norm."

According to Masuccio, there are two phases of onboard training: one that happens in the Dining conference room before the student ever enters the kitchen, and further training coordinated by managers to teach that student the specifics of their station.

Masuccio says that as director, he wants to create an environment where students can comfortably communicate if an issue is occurring.



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"I think the thing that I keep wanting the message [to be] is, students, if that occurs, to speak up and seek out their manager and just say, 'Hey, I haven't received the training,'" Masuccio says. "It's on us to continue that work."

Working Wildcats

Hegarty of the Working Wildcats spoke to PULSE about the union's mission and what they hope to do for student employees.

"The goal with it is to have a seat at the table," says Hegarty. "There's actually four unions on campus that represent staff and faculty. However, student employees are not represented at all. The goal with the union is that we would be able to sit down with administration and express our concerns in a way that would be listened to."

Hegarty goes on to explain that the difference would be, for example, one student asking their boss for a raise versus 1,000 student employees asking for fairer wages. She feels that by coming together, student employees have a lot more power than they do individually, and that's the answer to making positive change happen.

"That's the power in numbers," Hegarty states.

Hegarty also addresses the potential stigmas that could be associated with the idea of a workers' union, including the misconception that the only reason someone would want to join is if they "hate their job" or had something personal against their employer.

"I think a lot of people assume that because I'm one of the union people

that I hate my job," Hegarty says. "I actually really like my job, but I have a lot of friends who have not had very positive experiences and lots of friends who can't afford to live based on what they make on campus."

Togiailua, who is also a coordinator and founding member of the Working Wildcats, says the reason he helped form the Working Wildcats was after hearing other student workers' experiences and comparing them to his own.

"It was a multitude of events in terms of talking to other students while working different jobs on campus, and no matter who it was, what their race, what their gender, what their orientation or what their year in school was... we all understood there's so many inequities that apply to every student worker, whether it's intended or not," says Tongiailua.

"I think comparing notes was one of the biggest reasons to get that organization started," says Tongiailua.

Moving Forward

CWU's Vice President of Human Resources Staci Sleigh-Layman confirms that HR is aware of some of the issues that student employees have, and are working to improve things.

"I think the new vision of HR is about supporting the creation of a culture at CWU," Sleigh-Layman says. "I think it would be great if we talked about how people fit into that culture when they're hired and how we can sustain that culture over time."

She adds that while HR will always be dedicated to resolving the problems that student employees might face, the primary concern has become making sure that these issues don't come up in the first place.

"We work on disagreements and we work on supervisor-employee relationships, but we also try to prevent [problems]," says Sleigh-Layman. "That includes training, conversation and coaching. I always felt that there was some failure if you had to do an investigation."

Sleigh-Layman also shares that while HR can't guarantee to always have the perfect "remedy" to a student employee's problem, they are dedicated to making sure employees feel their concerns are heard and addressed.

Dean Masuccio says that while Dining's main focus is food, beverage and hospitality, he hopes that students who work in Dining come away with more than that. "I hope that they take away some of the skills and some of the experiences that will help them be more successful when they graduate and move on to something different after graduation."

Musuccio expands on this idea "I think about time management, just understanding how to interact with a team and multitasking. That's what I hope students experience and I hope that we continue to build a team and we create an environment where students leave with a positive experience," Musuccio says.

Many of the student employees PULSE spoke with have found different positions on campus or say they feel that the situation in their current position has improved.

Despite his complaints about the minimum wage, Seuberlich says that he's had a good experience working with Catering. "I've actually really enjoyed my position in Catering."


Hegarty says that one of the reasons she stayed at CWU to get her master's degree was because of how much she enjoys her job with Campus Tours.

Johnson, too, says she feels that things at the Learning Commons have improved following the hiring of a new Writing Center coordinator. "I feel like the direction the Learning Commons has gone in the last year or so is so much better than it was before. I feel like the management we have right now, the faculty are very accommodating of concerns, are very open and accepting, and are wanting to continue to make the Learning Commons be a place where both students and student employees feel welcome."

Johnson shares an anecdote that she suggests shows the new administration has worked to correct the issues of the past, including those of sex and gender discrimination on the part of former Writing Center management.

"Before we were discouraged from displaying our pronouns. Now we have them on our name tags. If we want to, we have the choice, which I think is a very important thing," Johnson says. "If someone doesn't want to have their pronouns displayed, they don't have to, but if someone does they are encouraged to do so," Johnson says.

"I 100% feel like it is a much more accepting and accommodating place now with this new management who wants not only to move past but keep becoming better," Johnson says.

The Working Wildcats' Togiailua underlines how vital student workers are to CWU. "The school doesn't operate unless we, as student workers, help operate the school." 

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