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

In February, CWU sent out a basic needs survey to record how students felt about their living conditions. The results of the survey included the statistic that 85% of students who took the poll report feeling some kind of food or housing insecurity, above the state average.

Dealing with the cost of living as a student isn’t always easy, and many students find themselves searching for jobs. Beyond the need for money, there are other reasons why jobs on-campus are attractive to students. Mason Sauls, a fourth-year film major and for-mer employee of CWU’s Diversity and Equity Center (D&EC), 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.”

However, 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.

In January, Student Leadership, Involvement & Community Engagement (SLICE) hired six student employees without prior notice, then hired them back nine days later, according to reporting in The Observer. This is the case for Sage Johnson, a third-year 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?” Saulsbury says. “Why is it that my peers can’t afford to eat? Why is it that the school needs to have this food pantry?”

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.”

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 $11.58 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 arround 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 have 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?”

“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.

“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

“I would’ve loved to live on it, but I couldn’t,” Saulsburys states.

Olene Togailua, a third-year studying sociology, women’s gender and sexuality studies, working as an apartment manager in Anderson Hall, says that she doesn’t think she 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?” Saulsbury says. “Why is it that my peers can’t afford to eat? Why is it that the school needs to have this food pantry?”

Mislagement

As covered by PULSE’s sister publication, The Observer, earlier this year, “On Jan. 2, six SLICE (Student Leadership, Involvement & Community Engagement) employees went on strike in front of an audience of their peers and inadvertently told by organization director Togiailua 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 building 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 these 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 firing’s “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, alumnae, 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 CMU was responsible for discrimination on the basis of sex and gender identity.

“I 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. As a result because of tardiness, 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, who says she has been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). “I was having trouble showing up exactly on time for work. I was usually five minutes late.” Saulsbury says, admiring 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.

“Very easily have been solved with more consultation with staff members, and further training coordinated before the student ever enters the kitchen,” KB says. “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.”

“Understaffed & Undertrained

KB Brown, who goes by KB, is a senior studying theater education and a former server working in SLICE 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 a few strategies in place that will help. “We created a petition that they did struggle with a lack of training once hired.”

“Understaffed & Undertrained

KB Brown, who goes by KB, is a senior studying theater education and a former server working in SLICE 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.

“If it is occurring, that shouldn’t be occurring. If it is occurring, that shouldn’t be the norm,” KB says. “But it is a problem.”

According to Masuccio, there are two phases of onboarding 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.

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

"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 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 Togiailua.

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

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."

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."

"The school doesn't operate unless we, as student workers, help operate the school."

- Olene Togiailua