

# For the Greater Good: Establishing a New Scholarship Fund to Support Student Employees

Tim Pyatt

Dean (retired), Z. Smith Reynolds Library (2015-2025)

Wake Forest University

## Abstract

In the fall of 2022, the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University launched an initiative to raise funds for academic scholarships that would support library student employees. While not unique among academic libraries, such scholarship programs are not common. This article shares not only the background and reasons why we pursued this initiative but also shares the methodology and research we did to implement the program.

*Keywords:* Library Fundraising, Scholarships, Student Employees

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## Why Scholarships?

At her inauguration as the 14th President of Wake Forest University on March 25, 2022, Susan R. Wenthe made scholarships for undergraduates a priority for the university (Wenthe, 2022). With an initial goal of creating 100 scholarships before the end of 2022, the *For Humanity* campaign would become part of the University's strategic framework with the goal to "Expand our financial aid resources so that becoming part of the Wake Forest learning community is financially accessible for all admitted students" (*Strategic-Framework.Pdf*, n.d.). All academic units – including the library – were to make scholarships a fundraising priority. With the library being the only unit among that group that did not matriculate students, how could we support and participate in this initiative?

## ZSR Library's Fundraising Structure

The Z. Smith Reynolds (ZSR) Library has a relatively short history of fundraising. In 2014 the library formed a fundraising group, the Council of Advocates, composed of alumni, parents of

students, and university supporters. The initial group was small (ca. 12 members) and were recruited with the help of University Advancement. Members were appointed for three-year terms with the possibility of renewal. All members were expected to make a three-year pledge of financial support (amount can vary for Councils and Boards starting up) to the library. Wake Forest uses a centralized fundraising model with development staff reporting to Advancement with a dotted line to the Dean of the respective academic school or library. The library initially had a part-time fundraiser; that position became full-time at the end of 2015.

Councils and Boards are typically used by campus units to help recruit major gifts and support priorities as set by a Dean. By 2018 the Library Council had grown to over 20 members and was made a Board of Visitors, which matched the fundraising structure of the College, School of Business, Law School, and School of Divinity. (*ZSR Board of Visitors | Wake Forest University*, n.d.) Members still served three-year terms with an expectation of a \$10,000 donation per year as is the standard for all WFU Boards of Visitors. Before President Wenthe made scholarships a fundraising priority, the focus of the Board had been supporting ZSR capital projects, special collections, and outreach programs. Sixteen spaces in the library ranging from study areas to reading rooms are named for Board members thanks to their donations.

### **Value of the Library Participating in a Campus Fundraising Initiative**

Because of Wake Forest's centralized fundraising structure, it benefits the library when it can participate in university initiatives. We receive greater support in creating fundraising collateral and promotional materials; the regional development staff add the library as an option when talking with potential donors; and the Library's Assistant Director of Development has a greater role in planning for the campaign. My Assistant Director of Development and I brainstormed about ways the library could participate. Through the undergraduate college, we offer credit-bearing library science courses – would there be a way to target those students? We also employ roughly 75 student employees each year; many are on work-study as part of their financial aid package. Others work because they need the extra income or are not eligible for financial aid programs. Student employees seemed our best scholarship option and I volunteered to survey my peers to see if such scholarship programs existed.

### **Benchmarking Best Practices**

I began my research by emailing my colleagues in the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL). Much to my surprise, several schools had scholarship programs for student employees. One school offered a full scholarship each year; another targeted students who wanted to pursue a Master of Library Science. The ASERL library that seemed to best match what we had in mind, scholarships for library student employees, was North Carolina State University (NCSU). I also did internet searches and found several other libraries that gave scholarships to student employees. Purdue also offered a program similar to what we were considering. See **Appendix I** for a list of libraries offering scholarships.

After several emails with NCSU colleagues, my Assistant Director and I asked if we could visit to learn more about their program. On November 17, 2022, we met with Jeremy Allen, Executive Director of Development for the NCSU Libraries. We learned that NCSU started its program in 2018 using an unrestricted fund. They continued to increase funding and donations for scholarships, and in FY23, they awarded ten scholarships. Just as important as learning about their funding model was learning about their process and timeline. They work closely with the university's financial aid office and use the university's scholarship application portal for their scholarships (*Libraries Student Scholarships*, n.d.). Applications typically start in February, with awards made in May.

Purdue University Libraries' scholarship program also matched what we thought would work at Wake. Unlike NCSU, they had a separate application process that the libraries developed. Since Wake does not have a scholarship application portal like NCSU, we were very interested in learning about their application process. Their application materials are posted online and were great models for the process we would use ("The PULSE Award," n.d.).

### **Campus Partners**

Now that we had an idea about how we might offer scholarships, the next step was to gather support. We started first with our campus partners. University Advancement loved the idea of us joining the campus scholarship initiative and volunteered to help us create collateral (print and digital marketing materials) that matched what the other academic units were using. (*For-Humanity-Zsr-2023.Pdf*, n.d.) Our next stop was the Financial Aid Office. They were extremely helpful and explained the awards process to us. They would manage the funds and review our potential awardees for eligibility. They also reviewed our application materials to ensure we were in compliance with campus and federal regulations. For the 80% of our student employees that have some form of financial aid, we wanted to make sure our scholarships would not negatively impact their aid packages. The Financial Aid staff assured us that our awards would be first applied to reduce their loan amounts. The idea that our program would potentially reduce student loan debt was an added plus!

### **Fundraising for the Scholarship**

Prior to our visit to NCSU, we presented the concept of student employee scholarships at our October 2022 ZSR Board of Visitors meeting. The Board meets twice a year in person (fall and spring) with calls twice a year (winter and summer). We fielded a lot of questions from the Board, who were initially skeptical, but after discussion they were intrigued by the idea. We promised to do some research and update them on our winter call. On the call we shared what we learned from NCSU and Purdue's scholarship successes and shared a fact sheet about our student employees. We promised to continue working on the scholarships and give an update at our April 2023 meeting.

After the call, one of our Board members wanted to know how he could help us get the scholarship program started. This Board member is a Wake Forest graduate who was also a

library student employee. We let him know that the university required a commitment of \$20,000 to start a current use fund. He pledged that amount in February of 2023 and we were underway! As a current use fund, anyone could donate to the fund. We made an appeal to our Board members and listed the fund as one of the giving opportunities on the library's website.

### **Awarding Scholarships**

With the fund in place and momentum from our Board, we wanted to pilot the scholarship process that spring and make awards for the following academic year (2023-2024). To maximize our pool of applicants, we decided to make all student employees eligible who would be returning to work in the library the following year. As previously noted roughly 80% of our student employees are on some form of financial aid; the remaining 20% are students who either do not qualify for financial aid but need extra funds to support their education, are foreign students not eligible for financial aid, or are graduate students in programs with limited financial aid assistance.

Our next step was to determine the amount of the scholarship and how many we could award. While the fund was established, the balance available was dependent on pledge payments and continued fundraising. After consulting with our colleagues in Financial Aid, we settled on a \$2,500 award for each scholarship. For students with financial aid packages, this amount was unlikely to impact their work-study award but would reduce their student loan. If we made five awards, that would be a total of \$12,500 which we could easily manage. However, we were already behind the application timeline suggested by NCSU, and we still had to finalize our application materials. We were able to make the call for applications in mid-April, with an application deadline of May 1<sup>st</sup> (Z. Smith Reynolds Library, 2023). Financial Aid let us know that they needed to know who would receive scholarships by the beginning of June. We hoped to have a quick turnaround and let students know about their awards before they left campus after finals.

Even with the late call for applications we received a good response. The application form was not lengthy – students listed where they worked, university memberships and awards, as well as a short statement on how working in the library contributed to their academic success. Applicants also needed a letter of recommendation from their supervisor. Eighteen student employees applied, and we were able to make five awards. The review committee consisted of the Dean and Associate Dean of the library; our top candidates were vetted by Financial Aid for eligibility before we made the awards. We purposely kept the review committee small; also, the Dean's Office did not typically hire student employees and we thought that using only the dean and associate dean would help resolve any concerns about bias. Our decision not to restrict eligibility was also supported by the range of students who applied. Our awards went to one graduate student, one student from South Korea, and three students on financial aid (one who was also a first-generation college student).

We wanted to celebrate our scholarship students. The first cohort was invited to have lunch with the ZSR Board of Visitors during their fall 2023 meeting. In addition, our lead donor and our awardees were invited to University's Benefactor Brunch in April of 2024. This annual event

celebrates the donors who create scholarships and gives them an opportunity to meet with the students who benefited from their gift.

## Conclusion

The initial success of our pilot encouraged us to continue and expand our scholarship program. As of May 2025, we have made three cycles of awards:

- Five awards for 2023-2024
- Ten awards for 2024-2025
- Twelve awards for 2025-2026

So far, we have kept the award amount at \$2,500. The number and financial amount of the awards will be reviewed annually. Fundraising has continued to be successful for this initiative. In addition to continuing donations to the current use fund, another Library Board member made a \$50,000 pledge that was matched by an anonymous university donor to create a \$100,000 endowment for library scholarships. Since the inception of the fund, 80% of our Board members have made contributions to support the scholarship outside of their pledges. Even with their pledges set, the excitement about the scholarship initiative prompted them to give additional gifts. We also received a surprise donation from a former Board member, James Lewis. Mr. Lewis made a historic \$25 million bequest to the American Library Association to support scholarships; a portion of this gift will be directed to the ZSR Library student employee scholarship program (King ('85), 2025). See **Appendix II** for a timeline outlining the development of the scholarship program.

In addition to these efforts, we also launched a crowdfunding campaign linked to my retirement as dean (*A Legacy of Learning*, n.d.). As a former library student employee, this program has been one of the most meaningful fundraising efforts I have undertaken. In lieu of retirement gifts, I requested that donations be made to our scholarship fund. We also created a video to explain the value of the fund that highlights one of the recipients (ZSR Library, 2025). While ZSR continues to accept donations for the scholarship program, we felt we had hit the point of program sustainability by the time of my retirement in June of 2025.

To conclude, I will return to my initial question, “why scholarships?” This is not something that every academic library offers and deviates from the more traditional library fundraising efforts to support capital projects and collections. For ZSR Library, we found there was value in pursuing this program beyond supporting the president’s scholarship initiative. It created new donation options and brought new donors to the library. Initially we were concerned that scholarships would compete with our annual fund giving, but after a slight dip in the initial year our annual fund donations remained strong. Participating in the campus fundraising initiative also got the story of the library to more of our Advancement partners and raised the profile of both our fundraising program and the Library’s Assistant Director of Development. Finally, for a

library that prides itself on supporting our students, it was the right thing to do. Student employees make so many of our programs and services possible, giving them extra recognition and support has only enhanced the library as a workplace. I started my career as a student employee and ended it as a dean – I can think of no better way of “paying it forward” than supporting our students!

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## Appendix I: Libraries that offer Scholarships

- **Appalachian State University:** Open to library student employees. <https://library.appstate.edu/news/2025-2026-library-student-employee-scholarship-winners> (July 3, 2025)
- **Florida International University:** Program for library student employees. <https://ignite.fiu.edu/give-now/giving-opportunities/units-and-divisions/libraries/nancy-sun-hershoff-scholarship/index.html> (July 3, 2025)
- **George Mason University.** Open to undergraduate and graduate student employees. <https://library.gmu.edu/support/endowments/studentassistant> (July 3, 2025)
- **North Carolina State University:** Open to undergraduate student employees; eligibility requirements vary for some scholarships. <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/libraries-student-scholarships> (July 3, 2025)
- **Purdue University:** Several scholarships are available to library student employees. <https://lib.purdue.edu/our-awards/pulse/> (July 3, 2025)
- **Syracuse University:** Open to library student employees nominated by supervisors. <https://library.syracuse.edu/students/> (July 3, 2025)
- **University of Central Florida:** Annual award to a library student employee. <https://library.ucf.edu/about/departments/administration/facts-figures/awards/> (July 3, 2025)
- **University of Florida:** Open to a student employee annually. <https://hr.uflib.ufl.edu/current-employees/student-assistants/james-leslie-rutherford-library-student-assistant-scholarship/> (July 3, 2025)
- **University of Iowa.** Open to continuing library student employees. <https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/admin/student-employee-scholarship/> (July 3, 2025)
- **University of North Florida:** Annual award to a library student employee. <https://libguides.unf.edu/c.php?g=1282227&p=9426210&preview=3666f4dc8c22a78411709bd1e29465ba> (July 3, 2025)
- **University of North Carolina Charlotte:** Annual full scholarship to a library student employee. <https://library.charlotte.edu/spotlight/do-you-have-federal-work-study> (July 3, 2025)
- **Wake Forest University:** Open to current student employees who will continue working in the library the following year. <https://zsr.wfu.edu/about/administration/zsr-student-employee-scholarships/> (July 3, 2025)

## Appendix II: Scholarship Timeline

- March 25, 2022: President Susan Wenthe make fundraising for student scholarships a priority in her inauguration speech
- October 20-21, 2022 (ZSR Board of Visitors Fall Meeting): ZSR Student Employee Scholarship ideation phase
- November 17-18, 2022 - Dean Tim Pyatt and Assistant Director Joel Rivera travel to NC State to learn more about scholarships in libraries
- January 11, 2023 (ZSR Board of Visitors Winter Call): Discussed questions about the scholarship and presented data about our Student Employees
- February 14, 2023: *For Humanity* Scholarship Collateral created for ZSR
- February 21, 2023: ZSR Student Employee Scholarship Current Use Fund is started by ZSR Board of Visitor member and former ZSR student employee
- April 17, 2023 - Scholarship application is live for student employees
- September 8, 2023: Announcement of Five Scholarship awardees (students notified in May) <https://zsr.wfu.edu/2023/zsr-awards-first-student-scholarships/>
- March 28, 2024: First Student Employee Scholarship Endowment established
- December 9, 2024: James Lewis makes \$25 million bequest to the American Library Association for scholarship with a portion to be designated for ZSR student employees
- May 9, 2024: Announcement of 10 Scholarship awardees  
<https://zsr.wfu.edu/2024/ay25-zsr-student-employee-scholarship-winners/>
- May 6, 2025: Announcement of 12 Scholarship awardees  
<https://zsr.wfu.edu/2025/ay26-zsr-student-employee-scholarship-winners/>