

# Human resource: Student workers are among library's most valuable collections

In a manner of speaking, Nij Tontisirin has already made her mark on the world.

She labors amid the smell of old paper, tending to the yellowing and sometimes terribly delicate creations of hundreds of cartographers across hundreds of years. They have charted shipwrecks, sewer systems and the topography of the ocean floor.

This is the map room in Olin Library, and since 2006 Tontisirin, a graduate student in regional science from Thailand, has called this her workplace. The collection includes more than 30,000 flat maps in drawers and numerous others in scroll tubes, as globes (including at least one beach ball) or in digital form.

As one of some 500 student workers for the Cornell University Library, Tontisirin's job is to care for the collection and to help patrons find their way.

"If you are interested in maps, we have just a few," she laughs. "One can spend days ..."

There is a 1936 map of Cascadilla Creek, a 1994 topographical map of New York City and a 1562 map of Bruges, a canal-filled city in what is now Belgium. Tontisirin will make sure each map is handled properly and returned to the correct location, knowing that a misfiled item could be lost for years before it is found again.

Under increasingly austere budget conditions, the library is expanding its effort to find endowment support for student workers like Tontisirin, who make less than \$10 an hour on average. Without them, the library would need another 80 full-time staff members, and even then it would not be able to deliver certain popular services, says Anne Kenney, the Carl A. Kroch University Librarian.

"Keeping some libraries open at night is totally reliant on student workers," she says, adding that student workers are a great source for native speakers who can work with foreign language collections.

The workers also provide expertise on current technology and can act as a test audience for new library initiatives, Kenney says.

Cornell University Library is the second-largest employer of students on campus. Kenney views the program as a win-win-win situation: Student workers benefit from training in research techniques, the library saves money, and the Cornell community is given expanded access to scholarly resources.

Karlene Weg heartily agrees. Both of her children, Adam '06 and Jennifer '09, worked in the Olin Library Media Center as undergraduates and benefited from the experience, she says. As a result, she and her husband, Howard Weg, decided to endow a student worker position.

"The library made a larger school feel small," Karlene Weg says. "They were in the library more because they would go either right before work or stay later. Not only was it beneficial to my kids, it was beneficial to the library also."

Today, there are five student-worker endowments, but Kenney's goal is to grow that number to 50. Endowments to support one worker for a year start at \$100,000.

Tontisirin adds that working at the library has enhanced her dissertation research on how the built environment affects where and how people choose to live.

"Graduate study is all about research," Tontisirin says. "I'm very familiar now with how the catalog works, and I learn a lot from other people by helping them."

## BY THE NUMBERS

According to a recent informal survey of student workers, working in the library led to:

- 63% Improved study/research habits
- 32% Improved grades
- 80% Improved ancillary benefits – such as access to other students/faculty, improved time management, interpersonal skills, exposure to other fields of study, appreciation for library services and financial help.



Nij Tontisirin is a graduate student in regional science and is one of 500 student workers employed by Cornell University Library, the second-largest employer of students on campus.