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Maybe Experience Really Can Be the Best Teacher

By George D. Kuh

College students work for different reasons. Many take jobs to pay tuition and related educational expenses. Others work to afford electronic gadgets (often ones that we, their professors, don't yet know exist). Regardless of the reasons, many professors and administrators consider students' working during college to be an unfortunate distraction from what should be their primary focus: their academic studies.

Nonetheless, next to going to class, work is by far the most common activity in which undergraduates take part. At least two-thirds of students at four-year colleges and four-fifths of their counterparts at two-year colleges work at some point during college, either on or off campus. And, contrary to long-held beliefs, findings from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement show that working is positively related to several dimensions of student engagement, especially for full-time students.

Given that policy makers and institutional leaders are looking for low- or no-cost ways to improve student success—especially for part-time and older students and from historically underrepresented groups—it's high time we look for ways to use the work experience to enrich rather than detract from learning and college completion.

Substantial research suggests that working during college is related to acquiring such employer-preferred skills as teamwork and time management. Employment also has the potential to deepen and enrich learning, as is the case when students participate in such "high impact" activities as learning communities, student-faculty research, study abroad, capstone seminars, and internships both paid and unpaid. When done well, those and other high-impact activities require students to connect, reflect on, and integrate what they are learning from their classes with other life experiences. Doing so helps students see firsthand the practical value of their classroom learning by applying it in real-life settings—which, additionally, often helps to clarify their career aspirations.

For more than a century, integrating learning and work along with service has been the mission of the seven federally recognized work colleges in the United States: the College of the Ozarks and Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, Ecclesia, Sterling, and Warren Wilson Colleges. These institutions meet the eligibility criteria for funds from the Work-Colleges Program administered by the U.S. Department of Education, including featuring work, learning, and service in their educational philosophy; requiring that all students work at least five hours a week (though most students at work colleges average between 10-15 hours); and making student performance on the job as well as the classroom part of the student record. The goal is to help students learn to balance study, service to others, and the demands of their jobs.

Other institutions are pursuing similar ends. The University of Maine at Farmington has created more on-campus jobs to help students see the connections between curriculum and work. Boston's Northeastern University and the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, offer large numbers of high-quality off-campus internships.

As part of a two-day visit to the University of Iowa in 2009, I encouraged staff members in the division of student services to teach their student employees to connect and apply what they were learning in class to their jobs, and vice versa. They subsequently started a small pilot program with students working in different kinds of jobs—clerking at the campus bookstore, assisting at the health center, and answering questions at the residence-hall information desk, to name just a few.

Supervisors met with their student employees twice during the semester. To focus those conversations, they provided students with a list of questions in advance:

- How is this job fitting in with your academics?
- What are you learning here at work that is helping you in class?
- What are you learning in class that you can apply here at work?
- Can you give a couple of examples of what you are learning here at work that you will use in your chosen profession?

Although only about half of the 33

students who had the structured meetings with their supervisors responded, the results of the survey comparing them with 373 co-workers who did not have such meetings were striking. On virtually every measure, the pilot-program group was much more positive. For example, about 70 percent of the students in the pilot program agreed that they had made connections between their work experience and their major-field course work, compared with only

29 percent of their co-workers. Sixty-nine percent of the pilot-program workers reported that their work had helped improve their written communication skills, compared with 17 percent of their peers. Seventy-seven percent of the pilot-program workers said their jobs had helped them use critical-thinking skills to solve problems, compared with 56 percent of the others.

Iowa is expanding the program this year, making an effort to include more students working in areas such as food service, where integrating academic learning with the work experience may be more challenging. Any college can adapt this generic, low-cost, potentially high-payoff approach.

For students in off-campus jobs, a classroom-based model can achieve similar ends. Professors can create assignments that encourage such students to make connections between course materials and their jobs, and can lead discussions that ask students to reflect on and integrate their learning. For example, in an upper-division writing course, a professor could ask students to analyze, in a genre appropriate for the field, the relevance of key concepts presented in class readings to one's workplace, or to dealing effectively with a low-performing co-worker.

Getting students to talk, in the company of their peers, about how they are applying their learning can be a significant challenge. One way to jump-start meaningful exchanges is to include in the class an upper-division student who is articulate in such matters. After a few sessions, students will very likely begin making and discussing connections themselves.

Not every course needs to be so structured for students to derive benefits from connecting learning and work. If working students have just one or two such courses in the first year, and again a few more times in the major, they would begin to develop an enhanced, practiced capacity for reflection and integration that they can use in other classes and settings.

So how can colleges build on those successes? One way is for a consortium of colleges and universities to seek funds to develop course modules focused on connecting learning and employment. The challenges and rewards of using work to educational advantage could then be documented and adapted by colleges with large numbers of working students.

There are many good ideas for enhancing college achievement and helping more undergraduates succeed. Few promise to deliver as

much bang for the buck as making work more relevant to learning, and vice versa.

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