



When Working Works: Employment & Postsecondary Success

Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26

This is the fourth in a series of publications focused on postsecondary success, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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The nation-wide focus on increasing college completion rates has put a lot of emphasis on strategies to increase financial resources so that students can work less. Though certainly worth pursuing, such policies will be difficult to implement on a broad scale in the current economic environment. And even if they are viable, we should be careful not to lose sight of the potential benefits of student employment. For many students, a positive work experience can facilitate, rather than derail, educational and vocational progress. We need to understand and appreciate what it looks like when working works, so that we can make a concerted effort to transform employment opportunities into drivers of student success.

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It's time to drop the term “nontraditional student” from our vocabulary. Many of today’s undergraduates are well over age 25, most are balancing school with a range of family obligations, and the vast majority work in addition to attending school. In fact, over 80 percent of community college students are employed. Of those, 61 percent work over 20 hours per week (see Figure 1). For most of these students, having a job while in school is not a choice; the majority of community college students say they would not be able to afford college if they did not work. ⁱ

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Most research on the impact of employment during college paints a fairly dismal picture. Studies have shown that students who work more than 20 hours a week often have lower grades, are less likely to graduate, take more time to complete their degree and have more mental health problems. ⁱⁱ However a more limited but important set of studies summarized in **Research Update** offers a useful reminder that work can, in fact, be a positive force in fostering student progress and success.

In **Research Update**, we summarize research about employment and postsecondary success. In **On the Ground**, we feature examples of employers and institutions that have found creative ways to support student persistence and advance their own bottom lines by creating “college-friendly” jobs. Finally, based on the research and examples from the field, we offer guidance about what higher education institutions, employers and policymakers can do to create employment opportunities that advance rather than hinder students’ educational goals.

Figure 1

	Community College	4 - Year
Worked	84%	73%
Worked more than 20 hours/week	61%	43%
Worked more than 35 hours/week	26%	14%

Source: NPSAS 2008, Demos

The Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26 Challenge is a multi-site technical assistance project to help communities develop goals and plans to increase supports for older youth – with an emphasis on helping low-income, minority and first-generation college-goers obtain postsecondary credentials with labor market value. Ready by 21 is a set of innovative strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment that helps communities and states improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life.

¹Thanks to Sara Toland, Jennifer Weber, John-Anthony Meza and Peg Walton from Corporate Voices for Working Families for their contributions to this brief.

Research Update

What are potential drawbacks for working students?

Most studies of this issue have found that working can have a positive influence on student performance only up to a certain point. (Most studies estimate the magic number to be somewhere between 15 and 20 hours a week for full-time students.) After that, the demands of work appear to have an adverse effect on performance, persistence and completion.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is evidence that working more than 20 hours a week hurts students' grades, and nearly half of working students report that their employment situation limits both their class schedule and the number of classes they take. In a clear demonstration of the work/school tradeoff, the likelihood of shifting from full- to part-time enrollment status increases as the number of work hours per week increases. And part-time students are less likely than full-time students to complete a degree.^{vi}

A particularly disturbing impact of employment on low-income college students is that nearly all earnings outside of work-study arrangements reduce their financial aid eligibility.

Ironically, financial aid eligibility requirements may actually push some students to work more than 20 hours to make ends meet. A particularly disturbing impact of employment on low-income college students is that nearly all earnings outside of work-study arrangements reduce their financial aid eligibility. Students earning more than a small allowable deduction see their expected contribution to college costs increase by 50 cents for every dollar of income. This severely penalizes students who work to support themselves or their families and runs counter to the intent behind need-based aid.^{vii}

What positive outcomes can result when students have access to good jobs?

Having access to good jobs or internship experiences is associated with a number of positive outcomes for students (other than income), particularly in the labor market.

Hiring edge – Students who work while enrolled in college are more likely than their nonworking peers to secure employment soon after graduating and to obtain employment that requires a bachelor's degree.^{viii} Researchers have also found that

students with jobs related to their major field, which create opportunities for contextualized learning, have greater success in securing employment after completing a bachelor's degree. In 2007, 50 percent of new college graduate hires had previously completed internships for the employer who ended up hiring them.^{ix}

Students who work report feeling more academically challenged by their coursework

Greater engagement in learning – Working 15 hours a week or less has also been found to have a positive impact on student involvement in learning. Students who work report feeling more academically challenged by their coursework, being more engaged in collaborative learning, having a deeper connection with faculty members, and being more involved in enriching educational experiences.^x

Better work skills – There is also evidence that working helps students develop time-management and other organizational skills, interpersonal skills and positive work habits.^{xi}

Better college persistence – Finally, and perhaps most importantly given the current focus on completion, there is evidence that community college students who work part-time have higher rates of persistence than students who work full-time or do not work at all. On-campus employment appears more likely than off-campus employment to have a positive effect. For example, students at DePaul University Chicago who worked on campus had higher rates of persistence in their early college years, and reported higher satisfaction with the college as well as higher completion rates.^{xiii}

What do good jobs for college students look like?

The characteristics of jobs that appear to support student success will not come as a surprise. Several recent studies and initiatives show that access to worksite mentors who provide on-the-job training and supervision contributes to student success, both in the workplace and in the classroom. Jobs that offer opportunities to learn about workplace behavioral norms (e.g., professional dress and effective communication) promote long-term labor market success. And jobs where students have opportunities for networking; effective training; and direct, constructive and frequent feedback from supervisors are good for working students.

On the Ground

Characteristics of Good Jobs for College Students

- **Flexible Hours (no more than 20 hours a week)**
- **“School comes first” environment**
- **Opportunities for skill-building**
- **Hands-on training, supervision and mentorship**
- **Connections to classroom content**
- **Career-related learning and networking**
- **Professional work environment (e.g., business dress, deadlines, effective communication)**
- **Clear, consistent and constructive feedback**
- **Academic credit**

Jobs that connect students to the local labor market in fields where they have an interest also accelerate success, as do job experiences that enable students to earn academic credit for their work experience. The Apprentice School in Newport News, Va., combines academic progress with employment in a powerful way through a partnership with the Northrop Grumman Corporation and by providing articulation agreements with local colleges.^{xiv}

Jobs that connect students to the local labor market in fields where they have an interest also accelerate success

In focus groups, students talk a lot about the importance of flexibility. Finding jobs that offer flexible scheduling is a priority, and having the option to pick up additional hours should unanticipated financial needs arise is also considered very useful for some students.^{xv}

While providing additional flexibility and creating intentional connections between work experiences and a students' education can require a specific commitment to student employees, most of the same things that make jobs good for students make them good for anyone. Intentional supervision, hands-on training, skill development opportunities and mentorship help all employees succeed, especially those who are new to the workforce.

In this section we bring to life these research-based characteristics of “college-friendly jobs” by describing three promising student employment strategies. The University of Maine at Farmington has made a unique commitment to expanding on-campus employment opportunities through its Student Work Initiative. The Office of Student Employment at Indiana University -Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) works closely with employers in the community to connect students with flexible job opportunities that link to their educational experience. Our third example is an employer-led Learn and Earn initiative called the Health Careers Collaborative, which works in partnership with Cincinnati State University and several local community partners to expand the local health care workforce and increase education and employment opportunities for local residents.

University of Maine at Farmington Student Work Initiative

In the fall of 1998, Theodora Kalikow, president of University of Maine at Farmington (UMF), launched the Student Work Initiative, a bold commitment to expanding on-campus employment opportunities for students. Because two of the initiative's primary goals are to increase retention and to strengthen and diversify interactions between students and faculty, the job opportunities are designed to enhance students' education and are intentionally integrated with academic majors and student life.

This campus-based employment program is not based on financial need; all students are eligible as long as they maintain a 2.75 GPA. Jobs pay up to \$1,000 per semester. Students who are eligible for federal work-study funds can use their allocation for any job within the work initiative. Students must apply and interview for positions. Once hired, they work with their supervisor to develop a schedule that works given the demands of the position and the student's school schedule.

When the initiative began in 1998, faculty looking for help with research were the first to jump on board with job offers. Positions now range from research and service opportunities to working as lab technicians and learning to repair computers. When faculty or staff propose individual positions through an RFP process, they must articulate specific skill development objectives for students, describe the working conditions that will facilitate retention (e.g., flexible hours) and explain their strategy for individualized supervision.

The impact on students comes through both in numbers and in stories. For example: Liz is a UMF junior majoring in International Studies. She holds two jobs on campus: one as co-coordinator of the Sustainable Campus Coalition and the other as a tutor. The two jobs combined amount to roughly 15 hours a week and are very flexible; she can do most of the tasks whenever she has time. “I came in undecided and my job with the Coalition helped me find my path and prepare for it,” she explained. “It gets me involved in campus life and is very hands-on work. Our supervisor is amazing and she gives

What began as a relatively modest strategy to provide jobs for students who didn't qualify for financial aid has evolved into a large-scale retention strategy.

terrific advice about work, schedule, classes, everything.” Kelsey, another UMF student who coordinates the Coalition with Liz, says the experience has “opened so many doors, so many connections, so many interests. It’s been a huge part of my college experience.” Tom, a senior who tutors and conducts research through the natural science department, said working on campus has been an important source of income but has also helped him learn to focus and develop valuable time management skills.

Between work-study funds and resources that the university commits to the Student Work Initiative, nearly half of UMF’s 2,000 students are employed on campus. What began as a relatively modest strategy to provide jobs for students who didn’t qualify for financial aid has evolved into a large-scale retention strategy that Shirley Yankura of UMF’s Financial Office described as “a very big part of the culture and a priority of the president.”

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Office of Student Employment

The Office of Student Employment at IUPUI does a lot more than help students find jobs. It serves as a hub for the university’s unique commitment to linking academic learning with career development and employment from the beginning

of the student experience. At IUPUI, academic advisors and career staff work in conjunction with “student employment consultants” to help students develop a “career action plan” and to identify work experiences that link to their academic interests and coursework.

In addition to being a key support for students, the office has become a go-to resource for community employers. The university has worked over the years to cultivate what Janna McDonald, director of the Office of Student Employment, describes as “symbiotic” relationships with employers. Employers get access to a large potential workforce through job fairs, recruiting events and the opportunity to post positions in a searchable database designed specifically for IUPUI students. They also benefit from the fact that IUPUI students have access to coaching in professionalism and work-life balance resources, as well as to employer support specialists who work with both on- and off-campus employers. Students also have access to information about a range of employment opportunities in the community, including employers offering tuition assistance, flexible hours, and relatively good wages.

IUPUI is explicit about its belief that working 20 hours a week or less is good for students. Institutional data back up the notion that working helps students engage in their education and graduate.

Several institutional leaders, including Scott Evenbeck, former IUPUI dean and now president of New Community College at the City University of New York, champion student employment as a critical piece of the persistence puzzle. IUPUI is explicit about its belief that working 20 hours or less a week is good for students. Institutional data back up the notion that working helps students engage in their education and graduate. “The benefits of student employment far outweigh the liabilities,” McDonald said. “It provides networking; the chance to learn professionalism, time management and organizational skills; as well as diversity exposure. More structure tends to lead to more planning.” That said, working more than 20 hours a week can be a “real hazard,” according to IUPUI’s own

data, and not every job constitutes a good job. “Making it meaningful is huge,” McDonald said. “That doesn’t mean they can’t stuff envelopes, they just need to understand why they are doing it. What’s the big picture behind the task? Employers have to know that they are hiring a student, which means they need to be flexible and very clear about the expectations up front. Good matching is key.”

Connecting students with jobs is probably the most visible function that the Office of Student Employment plays at IUPUI, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to developing partnerships with local businesses like UPS and Fastenal (two of the largest employers working with the Office of Student Employment), the university has also worked hard to hire more students on campus and to create a range of experiential learning, externship and internship opportunities that connect to different majors. McDonald summarized their goals this way: “This is about tying academic learning to employment and career development from the very beginning.”

Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati²

This employer-led Learn and Earn³ initiative has expanded the health care workforce in the Cincinnati area and increased education levels and employment opportunities for entry-level workers. The idea was hatched when two of the largest health care employers in the area found themselves struggling with high levels of turnover in entry-level positions and a lack of qualified applicants for professional positions. Realizing they were competing with one another for the same limited talent pool, they approached Cincinnati State Technical and Community College and Great Oaks Career Campuses to explore ways to work together to expand the workforce. The result was the business-led Health Careers Collaborative (HCC) consortium, which has created career pathways and helped participants earn a total of over 3,000 credentials.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) and health care employers identify participants. The skills of these new entry-level employees are assessed when they enter the program (and over time), and the vast majority qualify for developmental (remedial) coursework prior to beginning

To join the consortium, employers agree to adhere to best practice standards that include paying for remedial coursework, prepaying tuition directly to Cincinnati State, and offering flexible work hours and on-site career coaching.

a credential. Employers cover the cost of tuition for developmental coursework, and after completing remedial requirements, participants opt into one of five associate’s degree programs at Cincinnati State (nursing, respiratory care, occupational therapy assistant, clinical lab technician and surgical technician). They then enter into a small learning community with a cohort of their peers, where they benefit from coaching and other supports from CBOs. The employers pre-pay the tuition of their entry-level workers who participate in the program, thereby eliminating the tuition-reimbursement process, which can be a barrier for many low-income students.

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According to Alan Jones, chair of the collaborative and recently retired corporate vice president of human resources and public safety at UC Health, one of the participating employers, “HCC demonstrates that when business, higher education and community organizations collaborate they can create a more skilled and ready workforce and provide the employer with a positive return on their investments in training and education.” When retention rates, absenteeism and performance scores are considered together, UC Health reports a 12 percent return on its investment.

² This summary is based on a case study developed by Corporate Voices for Working Families. To learn more about HCC or to read other Learn and Earn case studies, go to http://corporatevoices.org/our-work/pse/micro_cases.

³ In Learn and Earn partnerships, higher education institutions and employers collaborate to provide working learners with the opportunity to pursue postsecondary credentials while simultaneously working and earning a living.

Recommendations

So what can be done to help transform the need to work into a driver of postsecondary success for more students? Research, along with the promising examples described above, demonstrate that better coordination and cooperation between higher education institutions, employers and government is critical. That said, each of these entities can take steps on their own to improve outcomes for working students.

Higher education institutions can:

- *Increase* on-campus work opportunities in addition to federal work-study funded jobs.
- *Promote* the benefits of on-campus relative to off-campus employment with students (e.g., convenience, flexibility and congruence with academic coursework) during orientation, first-year success courses and advising sessions.
- *Create* a work-friendly college environment including advising strategies that are consistent with the realities of working students and that explicitly help students manage work-school conflicts.
- *Adapt* coursework delivery to better meet the needs of working students (e.g. more evening, weekend and on-line courses; credit for experiential learning; support services that are available on evenings and weekends).
- *Use* data to better understand the trajectories, experiences and needs of working students.
- *Recognize* work as a vehicle for learning by emphasizing contextual learning and internship opportunities and by offering credit for employment experience.
- *Help* faculty and staff understand that working is necessary for many students and engage them, along with advisors and student life professionals, as partners in helping students link their academic pursuits with their employment experiences.

Federal policymakers can:

- *Consider* changes to work-study, including shifting the allocation of funds from mostly private, four-year colleges to community colleges ^{xvii}, and supporting paid off-campus internships as well as on-campus jobs. ^{xviii}
- *Eliminate* the work penalty that reduces or eliminates the financial aid eligibility of low-income students who must work.

State policymakers can:

- *Include* half-time students and adult students taking short-term occupational training in state student aid programs.
- *Recalculate* income limits in state student aid formulas to accommodate the relatively higher incomes of adult and working students, and include indirect educational expenses in the formula so that students can include the necessities of everyday adult life in their aid packages.

Employers can: ^{xix}

- *Provide* pre-paid tuition assistance.
- *Create* flexible work schedules.
- *Allow* students to study on the job if they have completed their required work. ^{xx}
- *Integrate* content and skills students are developing in the classroom into their job duties.
- *Provide* networking opportunities for students in their career field.
- *Create* articulation agreements and prior learning assessments with local education institutions to help employees earn credit for their work.
- *Steward* employee performance and progress with mentoring, hands-on training and consistent, constructive feedback.
- *Implement* workplace initiatives and organizational goals that focus on attaining a credential or degree.
- *Recognize* employees who have completed training programs and received postsecondary credentials to foster a college-going culture in the workplace.

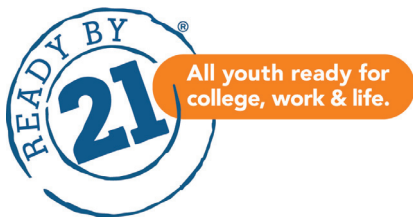
Conclusion

Balancing work and school can certainly be an obstacle to higher education persistence and completion. The research and examples just reviewed, however, illustrate that the opposite can also be true: A good job can facilitate rather than constrain student success.

Telling young people who need income to make ends meet not to work is unrealistic. To be credible and effective, our messages have to be more nuanced, and our efforts to make working work *for* students rather than against them have to be broader, bolder and much more transparent.

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