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Characteristics of Experiential Learning Services at U.S. Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Enrolled college students seek out work experiences for two primary reasons. For many, the income generated from working while in school is needed to support their education. The money they earn from working can go towards tuition and fees, room and board, travel, books, and other expenses.[3] Such income reduces the financial burden from families and lessens the reliance on student loans to help pay for college. In addition, some working students have families that rely on them for economic support. The other primary reason to work while in college is to gain experience in the workforce.[2] Such experiences help students determine if a particular career path fits their goals and provides opportunities to develop and foster workplace skills and abilities that will be seen as valuable by future employers. Students engaged in simultaneous employment and enrollment in school are referred to as working learners. This can be a full-time student who works part time, a part-time student who works full time, or a full-time student who also works full time.

Research indicates that working learners achieve higher outcomes than students who do not have such work experiences. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has found that students who have internships while in college report greater gains in student learning and have labeled internships as one of the high-impact practices that schools can facilitate.[5] These gains seem to translate into greater outcomes after college as well. One of the largest studies of college graduates in the United States, the Gallup-Purdue Index, found that there were six undergraduate conditions that led to graduates having higher probability of being engaged in their work and having higher levels of wellbeing.[4] Having an internship that allowed students to apply what they were learning in class was one of the six conditions. Those who had such an experience while in college were twice as likely to be engaged in their work and 1.5 times as likely to be thriving in wellbeing.

Not all work experiences, however, convey such gains. Ideally one does not work more than 15 to 20 hours a week[6] and is actively involved in reflecting on the work-and-learn experience.[4] Colleges and universities serve their students best when they can facilitate engaging in positive work-and-learn experiences.

This project collected data from individuals working in positions in colleges and universities with duties that include helping students find employment. The intent was to gather information about what kinds of assistance was offered to students so that they would be effective in their work-and-learn experience. The results serve as an indication of what assistance is available and provide direction for how to improve such services to working learners.

We partnered with the Cooperative Education and Internship Association (CEIA) to administer the survey. CEIA provided us with email addresses of their members, which includes educators at colleges and universities who are involved in experiential learning. An initial email from CEIA was sent from the organization explaining the project and asking them to look for our email with the link to the survey. A few days later we emailed 530 CEIA members who held higher education positions with our request to participate in the survey. After three sets of reminders, we had obtained 194 responses for a 37 percent response rate. There were 18 respondents from countries outside the United States, so we limited the analysis to those 176 in the U.S.

In the questionnaire, we used the following definitions for the programs we were interested in examining:

Internships

An internship integrates knowledge learned in the classroom with practical applications and skills development in a professional setting.

Cooperative Education Programs (Co-ops)

Co-ops allow students to work full time in areas that are aligned with their career goal or major. Students alternate between full-time student and full-time employee in positions related to their interests in order to combine a degree with significant work experience.

Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship allows students to obtain a recognized credential while gaining on-the-job experience. Apprentices shadow their employer and must provide instruction on knowledge in related technical subjects. An apprenticeship is typically full time and can be a year or more.

Federal Work-Study Positions

Work-study is a form of work and learn that is partially funded through the federal government. Although usually on campus, some work can be off campus as well.

Practicums

Practicums place a strong emphasis on linking academic knowledge with real-world application while being carefully assessed by a senior member of the field. A practicum does not necessarily lead to a credential, although certain types of practicums, such as residencies, do.

Most of the professionals working in colleges and universities that we surveyed told us that their institution provides undergraduate students with assistance in obtaining internships, with 96 percent telling us they did so. Approximately three out of four reported that their institution provided assistance with federal work-study positions (73 percent), with slightly fewer reporting assistance with cooperative education programs (co-ops), at 60 percent. About half (55 percent) provided help with practicums, but at 14 percent many fewer reported providing assistance with apprenticeships.

Although, as seen below in **Table 1**, colleges offer many types of support, there was a gap in how well our respondents thought they were actually used by students. Almost everyone reported that their school offered résumé reviews (98 percent), one-on-one appointments (97 percent), and on-campus career fairs (96 percent), but only about two out of three respondents thought that these resources were very well used by students. Those that were least likely to be seen as well used were practice interviews (35 percent), résumé workshops (35 percent), and group sessions by career services (32 percent). Unfortunately, even in those cases that most respondents thought resources were very well used, at most only about two-thirds (65 percent) thought this was the case. This means there were still about one in three career services professionals that thought students did not use these resources at a high level.

Table 1. Comparison of Services Offered and How Well They Are Used (%)

|	Offered	Very Well Used
Résumé review	98	64
One-on-one appointments between students and Career Services Professionals	97	62
On-campus Career Fairs	96	65
Practice interviews	95	35
Résumé workshops	89	35
Online listing of off-campus internships	88	57
Online listing of other jobs off campus (not internships)	86	55
Group sessions for students facilitated by Career Services Professionals	85	32
Online listing of other jobs on campus (not internships)	84	51
Online listing of on-campus internships	76	50

Approximately **three out of four** reported that their institution provided assistance with federal work-study positions **(73 percent)**, with slightly fewer reporting assistance with cooperative education programs (co-ops), at **60 percent**. About half **(55 percent)** provided help with practicums, but at **14 percent** many fewer reported providing assistance with apprenticeships.

When asked to name other types of resources not included in the previous question, respondents told us that they also offered job shadowing and job-site tours, as well as specific types of programs, such as etiquette dinners, salary negotiation guidance, and social media reviews.

When respondents speculated on why students would not use such services, the most prevalent reason given was that they were poorly advertised or were advertised but students were not paying attention (e.g., "many of them simply don't know we have these services."). Another prevalent reason given was that students did not think they needed these resources, until, as several told us, it was too late in senior year. Other respondents thought that students were so focused on academics and extracurriculars that they had no energy to give to anything else: "They are in survival mode and feel as if they do not have the time or energy to focus on things outside of the absolutely required." This could be particularly the case for working learners, especially those who work in jobs that are unrelated to their academics but critical to their financial survival.

The majority of respondents reported that their institution's emphasis on experiential learning programs was more established and stable (47 percent) than a fairly new and growing program (14 percent). Another 21 percent responded squarely between the two (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Stage of Experimental Learning Programs
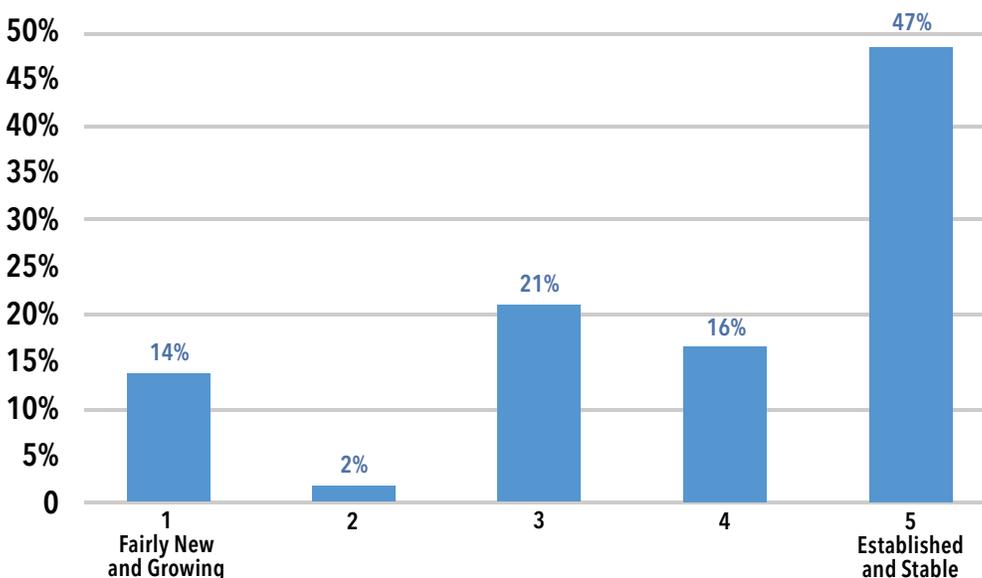
Respondents reported that their institution had work-and-learn resources that were designed specifically to assist underserved populations[1], with 58 percent telling us that they had such specialized services. An additional 10 percent were considering offering such a resource. About a third (32 percent) did not have such services, including one percent that had previously offered such assistance but were not doing so currently.

When institutions did offer specific services for underserved students, they were not likely to do so through a dedicated career services staff person. Most of those with programs for underserved populations were working with other offices that had campus-wide responsibilities specific to populations such as first-generation students or racial/ethnic groups. In other cases, the career services office had a specific program for underserved students, again, usually aligning with the reason why they were underserved (e.g., first generation, etc.), but not a dedicated staff person for that role.

Those who had no such resources nor plans to implement them usually told us one of two things: either they did not have the room in their budget to do so or they did not see a need for such services. The usual reason given for not having resources specific to underserved students was claiming that they did a good job with all their students and did not need to address specific needs.

Very few respondents (14 percent) told us that their institution required that all students complete an internship, co-op or other type of experiential learning regardless of major. It was much more likely that certain academic departments required such an experience for the major (65 percent). About one in five, or 19 percent, told us that they did not have any experiential learning requirement for any of their students. Although when asked, many respondents told us that the departments that required some form of experiential learning were business, science, and trade-oriented majors (e.g., health science and web design). Some also told us that their institution required internships or other work-and-learn experiences of English majors, art majors, and other humanities majors that are not always seen as conducive to such programs.

At some schools, off-campus internships for students are facilitated by staff, and at others the faculty are more involved. In our survey, 40 percent told us that both faculty and staff were involved, but 43 percent told us that although some faculty helped students with off-campus internships, the main source of assistance was from career services staff. Only 11 percent told us that the mix was skewed towards faculty, and another three percent told us that at their institution, only faculty, and no staff, helped students find off-campus internships. An additional small proportion, four percent, told us that at their institution it was only staff who did this and no faculty. It's more likely the case, then, that students receive assistance from career services staff in obtaining off-campus internships.

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[1] "Underserved populations" were described as "racial minorities or low-income students (or other underserved populations)" in the questionnaire.

As seen in **Figure 2**, most institutions do not provide specific support to working learners. At best, one in three (32 percent) respondents reported that their institution provided counseling on how to balance work and school. About as many offered extended office hours for students who work during the day (28 percent). Only about one in five, or 18 percent, offered information sessions on how to balance work and school. Even fewer (nine percent) told us that they offered support for flexible academic deadlines, such as assignments and tests, for students who worked. Clearly there is room for improvement here.

Figure 2. Support Provided to Working Learners
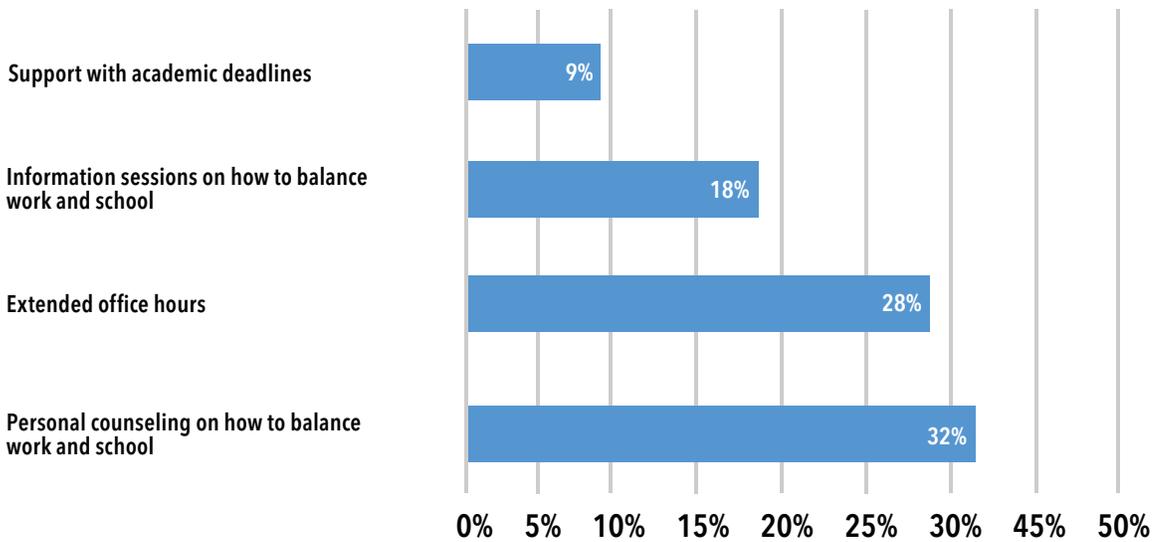
A key factor in effective experiential learning is the alignment of the work experience with what the student is learning in school. About half of our respondents told us that their institution did a lot to align the two, with 48 percent answering in this way. About another quarter, 26 percent, told us that their institution did a moderate amount. The rest were not doing as much, with 21 percent telling us they put forth some effort, but only three percent saying little and one percent telling us that the institution put forth no effort at all to align the two.

We examined this and other characteristics of programs in another question that asked about what the institution required of experiential learning programs. As seen in the table below, most required that the position has regular supervision (90 percent) and a job description (88 percent). Fewer, but still a sizeable amount, required an alignment with student learning (70 percent), with most of the rest preferring but not requiring this (26 percent). The disappointing news here is that only 20 percent of our respondents told us that they required that the student be paid. While most preferred this but didn't require it (69 percent), this crucial piece of the student experience does not have great support at the institutional level.

Table 2. Required Versus Preferred Experiential Learning Program Characteristics (%)

	Required	Not Required	Not Considered
Regular supervision	90	8	1
Job description	88	10	2
Alignment with student learning	70	26	3
Paid position	20	69	10

Institutional monitoring of the experiential learning situation varied quite a bit and was not universally consistent. Only 27 percent of our respondents told us that someone at the institution held regular meetings with the students while the experience was happening, and even fewer (15 percent) held regular meetings with the student's supervisor. A few (seven percent) told us that there were regular meetings with someone else in the organization (e.g., an internship coordinator). Sixteen percent did not monitor the situation at all.

Many of the respondents (42 percent) told us that there was an "other" type of monitoring that went on, but an analysis of those responses does not yield much of a pattern. Some relied on email check-ins or online check-ins through platforms such as Moodle or Handshake. Mostly, the "other" category answers explained that monitoring varied by the type of position (e.g., co-op versus internship) or institutional point of contact (e.g., faculty versus staff).

More broadly, institutions were reviewing the experiences that students were having. Only three percent told us that they did not do any type of review. While most were conducting a formal review with certain criteria (59 percent), a good number (41 percent) did their review through informal discussion. About half did so on an ongoing basis (49 percent), and 44 percent did so once a term or semester, while a small number did so once a year (two percent) or less frequently (three percent).

As seen in **Table 3**, many respondents told us that they collected different types of information on the student experience. Almost all collected satisfaction data from the employer (91 percent) and the student (90 percent). Many (83 percent) were also measuring the skills that the student gained through the experience. What happens after the experience was less well covered, with only 66 percent collecting data on the interest of the student to work with that employer in the future and 65 percent actually collecting data on if this actually happens. A good number of respondents that did not collect this information, however, would like to.

Table 3. Student Experience Information Collected by Institutions (%)

	Yes	No, Would Like To	No, Do Not Want To
Supervisor satisfaction with student	91	8	1
Student satisfaction with experience	90	9	1
Evaluation of skills learned by student	83	16	1
Student interest on future employment with organization	66	26	8
Student employment by organization in the future	65	31	5

For those respondents who told us this information was not collected, the largest factor was because of a lack of resources to do so (42 percent). Other reasons were not enough time to collect the data (18 percent) or not having access to the people they would need the data from (12 percent), rather than there not having enough interest in the results (five percent) or not knowing how to collect the data (five percent).

Only 19 percent of respondents told us that they had an appropriate amount of funding to run these programs, although 50 percent were not sure. About a third (31 percent) told us that they did not have enough funding. There was more agreement that if funding were increased the program would be better (74 percent), with 23 percent being unsure and three percent said that it would not be better.

Overwhelmingly, respondents would put additional funding into increasing their staff, as many feel very understaffed. The two biggest needs for new staffing were additional positions to help find experiential programs for students and increased marketing with students so they know about positions. In addition, respondents would use the new money to provide more stipends to students taking unpaid internships, invest in customer relationship management (CRM) systems, and create programs to help prepare students for work. Some would expand their assessment efforts.

We asked about policies at the federal, state, or local level that had an impact on experiential learning programs. One of the most prevalent policy concerns was the difficulty of placing international students into internship and co-op programs, with organizations being unwilling to put forward the extra effort to place an international student into their positions. Similarly, placing interns from a public university in one state into a position in a different state is complicated in some states. Some respondents mentioned that policies concerning unpaid positions complicate placement. Finally, other concerns included the connection between hours worked, credits offered at the institution, and how student status affects student loans. For example, a student in a full-time co-op position that does not carry course credit might need to start paying loans or enter into forbearance, which might incur interest.

Many colleges and universities in the United States provide assistance to undergraduate students in obtaining experiential education programs, such as internships. In many cases it is the professional career services staff that is facilitating participation in these programs, although to a lesser extent faculty are the main point of contact. Most schools have fairly well-established and stable programs.

A wide variety of services are offered, such as one-on-one appointments with career services staff and on-campus career fairs, although our survey respondents did not always think such services were well used by students. Lack of awareness was one factor that had an effect on use, but many career services staff administrators felt that students did not feel they had have the time or did not make the time due to a lessened sense that they needed such help.

Many institutions offer specialized assistance in experiential learning programs for underserved populations, although the methods by which this was given varied, with some schools having dedicated staff in career services offering such assistance. More often, however, these were accomplished in partnership with other offices on campus with responsibilities for a particular underserved population. Two things stand in the way of more widespread offerings: budgetary priorities is one obstacle, but a more insidious obstacle is the apparent lack of understanding why underserved students might need different types of assistance than others.

Of additional concern was a general lack of assistance for working learners on how to navigate student success and work. Of the four areas we investigated, at the most only a third of respondents told us that they offer personal counseling about how to balance work and school. Only about one in four offer extended office hours to accommodate working students, which is quite limiting. Even fewer support working learners with assistance with academic deadlines. These are issues of institutional rigidity that need to be overcome if we are going to be able to adequately promote experiential learning to all students.
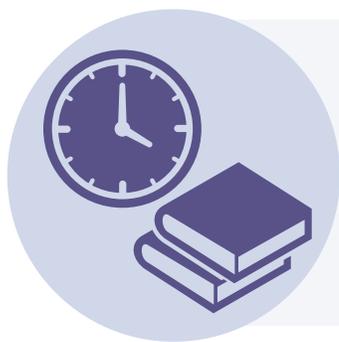
This study indicates that there are several areas that can be targeted for improvement. **Increasing resources for these important areas supporting the student work-and-learn experience could result in a greater level of services in areas such as one-on-one assistance.** We need greater ability to expand services for underserved students, such as expanded office hours and targeted services.

Similarly, the least likely requirement of institutions providing access to experiential learning programs was that the student be paid. This was a preferred characteristic rather than one that was mandated by the institution. Not all students can afford to take an unpaid position, needing compensation for school and other expenses, and since students in such a situation are more likely to be from underserved populations, this means underserved students have fewer work-and-learn options. In addition, research indicates that students who participate in unpaid internships in college have lower salaries and levels of satisfaction in their first job out of school.[1] Thus, unpaid positions have both short-term and long-term consequences. While some institutions offer stipends to students to mollify the short-term consequences (and would increase stipends if they had more funding), this presumably has little impact on the long-term consequences.

It is not the case that all college students are young adults from affluent means and can afford to be placed in an unpaid work-and-learn situation. This has not been the reality for a long time. Those who are seeking to obtain post-secondary degrees are from many different age and social-economic groups. The evidence shows that experiential learning experiences lead to outcomes that many college students go to college for, which includes getting a better job and having a better quality of life. Both colleges and organizations that provide work-and-learn experiences must realize that unpaid experiential learning experiences hinder the ability of underserved populations to fully participate in this type of social mobility.

This study indicates that there are several areas that can be targeted for improvement. Increasing resources for these important areas supporting the student work-and-learn experience could result in a greater level of services in areas such as one-on-one assistance. We need greater abilities to expand services for underserved students, such as expanded office hours and targeted services.

Beyond resources, there needs to be a greater understanding of the importance of work-and-learn experiences for all students. The path of least resistance is one that favors those who can afford to take an unpaid internship and do not have obstacles to using services that are only offered during regular business hours. This is an increasingly small proportion of college-going students. Both upper-level administrators who set budgetary priorities and employers who decide to offer a paid or unpaid position need to recognize the importance of these programs not only to the educational mission of the institution but also to the future staffing of organizations in the United States.

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