INTRODUCTION

Working Through College

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"I worked my way through college." Zechariah Brigden was the first person able to say this. He said it in 1657 (according to Trivial Pursuit), and since then the employment experience has enriched the lives of millions of college students.

Student employment (with over 11 million students working, 81% of all students enrolled each year) (Knapp, 1993) is, after class attendance, the most universal experience of American college students. More students work than participate in sports or clubs, live in a residence hall, or own a car. And, the pervasiveness of the student employment experience makes American higher education different from higher education in almost every other country in the world.

What do we know about it? Not as much as we should. Finding and holding a job is a largely individual process. It may be on or off campus. Students may continue in a job held prior to enrolling, find a job on their own after enrolling, or be assisted in finding work by the university. They may combine either part-time or full-time enrollment with part-time or full-time employment. Most jobs are not directly and formally tied to the academic experience. The employment of students is not the province of any government agency, and, on the campus, the duty may be shared by several offices. Thus, it has not been studied to the extent of many other common student experiences, and information is from various sources and not always up-to-date.

But what research has been done over the past generation leads to some intriguing conclusions. Student employment usually benefits the student. It has obvious financial benefits, does not harm grades, can improve retention, and appears to boost career achievement after graduation. Before exploring these issues, however, we need to examine the demographics of our working students.

Who Works?

A significant majority of college students work, and the percentage has been increasing for 30 years for all types of students. The most consistent source of information has been the Bureau of Labor Statistics (O'Brien, 1993), which currently estimates over 63% of students are working (at the moment in time the statistics are collected). Over the course of a year, 81% of undergraduates work at least part of the time (Knapp, 1993).

The increased likelihood of employment has taken place for all categories of students.
Although older students, married students, and part-time students have fueled much of the growth in college enrollments the past three decades, and all of these groups are more likely to work than traditional students, employment has surged for all categories of students.

Among traditional students (full-time, undergraduate, dependent students aged 16-24), the percentage of those working has increased from 35% in 1972 to 46.5% in 1988 (Hexter, 1990). For part-time students, 84% are employed (Mortenson, 1995). And an astounding one in fifteen students is employed full-time and attending school full-time.

Although all types of students at all types of universities are more likely to be employed, employment is more likely:

- at public universities
- for women
- for older students
- for independent students
- for middle class students
- for part-time students
- at two-year colleges
- for upperclassmen
- for volunteers in the community.

Working students are less likely to receive financial aid (Hexter, 1990). As might be expected, half of students work in administrative/clerical positions, food service, and retailing, with the rest scattered through the remainder of the economy (Chavez & Mulugetta, 1994).

Why Do They Work? What Do They Gain?

Financial Benefits and Financial Necessity

The first and most obvious benefit is financial: Students earn money while in school. They need it. "Cost of education" and "extra expenses" were the top two reasons for working given by 13,000 students surveyed by the National Student Employment Association (NSEA, formerly the National Association of Student Employment Administrators, or NASEA) and Cornell University in 1992 (Chavez & Mulugetta, 1994).

In 1965, students contributed 11% of college costs. This nearly doubled by 1985. The proportion of "self-help" financial assistance (work-study or loans) rose from 31% of available aid in 1972-73 to 51% in 1991-92 (Knapp, 1993). Most of the increase in "self-help" is attributable to increased borrowing.

While median family incomes grew 73% in the 1980s, college costs increased 109% at public universities, and 146% at private ones. The rise in college costs also has outpaced price increases in new cars, food, new homes, and medical care.

The 1995 class of American college freshmen expressed greater concern about affording college than any freshman class of the last 30 years (Postsecondary Opportunity, 1996). They have good reason.

Traditional students have median annual earnings of $3,000. Non-traditional students have median annual earnings of $10,000 (Knapp, 1993). However, in most cases, this is not enough to finance a college education. The newsletter Postsecondary Opportunity calculated how many hours per week a student would have to work to cover expenses at an average public and average private university. Our typical student, working at a minimum wage job, would be required to work 44 hours per week to pay for a public university, or 91 hours per week to enroll in a private university (Mortenson, 1995).

The days of working one's way through school are done, yet the need to work has never been greater. But finances, although the primary reason for working, are far from the only reason motivating students. The NASEA/Cornell survey (Chavez & Mulugetta, 1994) asked students why they work. After paying college bills and earning money for expenses, the top reasons cited were the following:

- Career exploration
- Enjoyable/fulfilling
- Career contacts
- Enriches academics
- Social interaction
- Learn time management.
Career Outcomes

The NASEA/Cornell survey (Chavez & Mulugetta, 1994) indicated working students believe they are enhancing their career prospects by working. However, the question on this survey was given to students still in school, before they could truly see the results. Other research shows that indeed working may help a student’s postgraduate career, in both the short-term and the long-term.

Phillip Gleason found that students who worked consistently in college were more successful (in terms of earnings and employment rates) in their first year or two after graduation (Gleason, 1993). Pascarella and Terenzini’s review of research in How College Affects Students “suggests that working during college, particularly in a job related to one’s major or initial career aspirations, has a positive net impact on career choice, career attainment, and level of professional responsibility attained early in one’s career” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Employers agree. A survey of 1200 human resources professionals conducted by Robert Foreman of United Parcel Service (UPS) (Foreman, 1993) showed a strong bias for student employment experience in hiring for entry-level positions. There was strong agreement with the statements that part-time work is as important as grades, and that former student employees exhibit the following behaviors:

♦ produce better work
♦ accept supervision better
♦ are better time managers
♦ have better team skills
♦ make a more rapid transition
♦ have more realistic expectations.

Many graduates are able to parlay that initial boost provided by student employment to more success throughout their careers. Over the longer term, the Occupational Outlook Quarterly (Shelley, 1994) gives a qualified endorsement to obtaining a college degree. “Recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projections indicated that about three-fourths of the college graduates who enter the labor force between 1992 and 2005 can expect to find college-level jobs.” But they caution, “wide variations are expected in the types of jobs graduates get and the income they earn, even for jobs defined as college-level.” One-quarter of college graduates are likely to obtain jobs not requiring college-level education. Thus, student employment experience can enhance entry-level marketability, increasing the odds for longer-term success. Shelley (1994) writes:

On average, graduates earn more and are less likely to be unemployed than non-graduates. In 1992, median earnings for college graduates were $37,000 per year, compared with $21,000 for high school graduates. The average unemployment rate for college graduates was 3% that year, compared with 8% for high school graduates. Yet even for the 1984-1992 period, BLS data indicate that a college degree does not guarantee success in the job market.

To increase the chances of success, many students are turning to student employment: experience plus a degree. In fact, Donald Casella and Catherine Brougham’s (1993) survey of recent graduates at San Francisco State University reveals that job/intern/volunteer experience as an undergraduate is the runaway number one factor in finding postgraduate employment, cited by 56% of respondents. And it was perceived as more important than high GPA, major, job search skills, personality, and knowing someone.

This concept that student employment experience is a springboard to professional employment is further gaining currency among employers. They are increasingly investing in employment, cooperative education, and internship programs as recruiting tools.

Academics

Despite a perception among many parents, students, and faculty that working may harm academic achievement, there is little evidence to support this. On the surface, it makes sense. Anything a student does outside of class is competing with study time for that student’s attention.
But the evidence is that study time is the last activity to be reduced when a student finds a job. A survey at five universities looked at how employed and non-employed students spent their time away from classes and jobs. There was little difference in time spent reading for pleasure, volunteering, and attending parties or cultural events. In fact, the only activity with a significant difference was watching TV: Non-employed students watched more television (McCartan, 1988).

Many other studies show little difference in academic achievement between employed and non-employed students. Van de Water, in research conducted in Washington State, found that "there is no relationship between working and grade point average" (Van de Water, 1989). The NSEA/Cornell survey (Chavez & Mulugetta, 1994) of 13,000 students revealed "the GPA of both (working and non-working) student populations appears to be relatively similar." Other studies show either no relationship, or a slight grade advantage, as long as a student is working a moderate number of hours per week.

Retention

Employment has long been associated with retention, but most of this perception has been based on examining traditional students. Depending on whom you look at, and how you look at them, employment can either help or hinder student retention. The key question to ask initially: Is the individual primarily a student or primarily a worker? To judge where an individual is on this student-worker continuum: Are they enrolled full-time or part-time? Are they working full-time or part-time? How much is the job related to their career goals and to academic studies? Or, do they see any connection or benefit with what they are learning in the classroom with what they are doing at the job?

If a student views himself or herself primarily as a student who works, is attending full-time and working part-time, and sees a relationship between classroom learning and job success, employment is positively associated with retention.

If the student perceives himself or herself as primarily an employee taking classes (particularly if enrollment is part-time and work is full-time), then employment is negatively associated with continued enrollment.

Since most student employees are attending full-time and working part-time, and see their primary responsibility as attending college, student employment does appear to enhance retention for traditional students. This interpretation also lends itself to more intrusive approaches on the part of colleges to structure student employment programs as retention tools. This is particularly applicable to on-campus employment.

Astin's "Involvement Theory" posits that "students who are more actively involved in aspects of their college experience achieve higher grades, are more satisfied, and have higher persistence rates than students who are less actively involved" (Wilkie & Jones, 1994). Student involvement with the university is associated with retention. Almost any involvement (campus residence, clubs, sports, interaction with faculty and staff, etc.) seems to help. Of course, employment is involvement, encouraging integration with the university.

One survey asked students what they would do when faced with financial difficulties. They responded that they would first cut expenses and then find a job. Leaving school was the least likely response (Churaman, 1992). Thus, employment is seen by students as increasing the possibility of retention.

Some studies do suggest that employment, while improving retention, can delay graduation. If a student reduces course load to work, the obvious outcome is enrollment for additional semesters. Churaman’s (1992) survey does indicate students may reduce credits to cope with financial difficulties, but this is the second least likely strategy. Only withdrawing completely had lower responses.

Intangibles (or a Challenge to Researchers)

Although there is no research to support these opinions, the author has observed the following:
Self-reliance

Student Employment is close to the Office of Financial Aid. Every day students complete extensive paperwork and throw themselves at the mercy of needs analysis to solve their financial difficulties. They are passive and hopeful that something might be done for them.

In contrast, Student Employment sees students who are looking to their own skills and initiative to solve their financial difficulties. As cited above, students report “working or looking for another job” as the second most attractive strategy in dealing with financial trouble (Churaman, 1992).

An Appreciation of Democracy

Frank Newman, President of the Education Commission of the States, advanced this hypothesis when he served as Keynote Speaker at the 1986 NASEA conference. He spoke of the way most countries educate their elite. Students are tested and tracked from young ages, and those fortunate enough to be selected for university usually have their way paid. Being a student is their only job. These students graduate and move on to the professions, government and business, becoming the leaders of their countries.

Our college graduates, even at elite universities, follow similar paths but with a crucial difference. It is very likely that our students also may have had experience making pizzas, waiting on customers, or working in a factory. Even our best students experience the kind of work that most of our citizens do. They work alongside people with less education and fewer prospects. They get to know those individuals and their lives in a way that students in other countries never do. And this knowledge, of what it’s like to make a living “by the sweat of one’s brow,” makes them better leaders for a democratic, inclusive society.

Conclusion

To conclude, Bill Ramsay, Past President of the National Association of Student Employment Administrators, in his inaugural address, spoke of what student employment meant to him. The first point is my own.

1. Student employment is more than a means of financing an education. It contributes to a sense of self-responsibility and can allow individual students to assume adult responsibility with a “clean slate,” free of debt, and freely able to pursue their dreams.

2. Student employment is more than career development. We all know and appreciate the career benefits of work experience for students. The values of a work record in placement is well recognized, but student employment is more than an effective tool of career development and expression.

3. Student employment is more than an educational laboratory. Students learn tremendous amounts in experiential settings and test their academic lessons in the work world laboratory.

4. Student employment is more than personal growth. The development of skills, the self knowledge, the maturity gained from work experience should be highly valued, but student employment is more than personal development.

5. Student employment is more than good citizenship. Taking one’s place in society as a contributor, as well as a consumer, fosters a sense of community and of responsibility. It breeds good citizenship in a democracy, but it is more than a way to foster social responsibility and community service.

Student employment can be all of these and more. Our commitment in higher education and in public policy must be to encourage the value of work.

References


overall perceptions of the academic year work experiences. *Journal of Student Employment, 6*(1).


