Once upon a time, the accepted entry level for the professional American workforce was after graduation from college. Corporate America would visit our campuses and try to ferret out the best and the brightest from among our seniors, soon to "enter the real world" for the first time. No longer! Those companies who still come to campus for recruiting seniors are finding that the "pick of the crop" are often not even in the recruiting pool. Also, those students waiting until the semester of their graduation are often behind the curve, even if their grades are exceptional and they have been model students. What has happened?

These phenomena are but two sides of the same coin: work experience, internships, cooperative education, and volunteering before graduation have become the new entry level for professional level work after graduation. Smart students and smart recruiters have known this for a while and are quietly using these paths to more effective recruiting.

In a recent survey at San Francisco State University (Table 1), the evidence of this new trend in recruiting is significant. When May graduates were asked in October, "What is the most important factor in your finding work?" a whopping 56% declared, "My work experience, internship, or volunteering!"

### Table 1
Factors Most Important in Finding Work: Surveys of SFSU Graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>1986 %</th>
<th>1993 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High GPA</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of major</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience/internship/volunteer</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective job search campaign</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality skills</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing someone influential</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Over the last few years, this has been a growing trend. In 1980, the percentage of graduates marking “experience” as the most important factor was 35% and has been steadily climbing every year the survey has been taken, reaching now to 56%. In contrast, “Choice of Major” has been in a reverse trend, declining over the years.
as an important factor in finding work. In 1980, the percentage was 30% and has declined to the present 13%.

Students Are Workers

The majority of students do work, and the percentage of working students continues to grow. On most campuses, 70% or more of the students are employed by their senior year of college (Conrad & Hedin 1981; McCartan, 1988). The increase in working students is caused by many factors, such as a higher percentage of older students and students who are supporting children, as well as higher tuition costs and living expenses. How this work affects both academic performance and a student's future career is determined by both the quantity and the quality of the work.

Of the students who do work, nearly two-thirds work part-time. There is evidence that, while working full-time can cause academic versus job conflict, part-time work actually has a positive effect on both grade point average and student persistence. One study, conducted for the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board indicated that students working 15 to 20 hours per week tended to perform better academically than either students who worked 0 to 10 hours a week, or students who worked more than 20 hours (McCartan, 1988).

No Substitute For Experience

Any work experience has the potential to generate benefits for the student. Even when the work is not related to a student's field of study, an employed student is building networks, calling forth greater organization and responsibility, increasing awareness of work skills, strengths, and values, and is all the while gaining self-confidence. The employment most valuable, however, is that which gives students the opportunity to work in a targeted field.

Internships and cooperative education positions provide employment that seems to fit the optimum profile for academic performance and career success. Internships and co-ops are nearly always 10 to 20 hour positions and are integrally linked to academic study and career choice. Other paid employment and volunteer positions may also fit this profile of “part-time professional positions.” It is the part-time professional position which offers the greatest benefits to the working student, both before and after graduation.

In either case, the odds are better for successful career employment among these working, networking, skill-developing students than for their counterparts who wait until the end of their college experience to step into the “real” world.

Students Learn Everywhere

While still in school, part-time working experiences enliven classroom material and integrate theory with practical experience. When what is being taught can actually be applied, the learning becomes more relevant for the student, creating greater motivation for study (Veenendall, 1983; Davis, 1987). This may be one of the factors which influence the fact that student retention is enhanced by participation in internship or co-op experiences (Kerka, 1989).

These work experiences also help a student to test career interests. Students clarify and better understand both career and personal goals through actual experience in an internship setting (Davis, 1987). Studies have shown that internships often change student preferences regarding their choice of the ideal job, while increasing careers in their field of study after graduation. Exposure to the work place inculcates students with a sense of reality regarding their career choices, and new employees who have interned have the advantage of realistic expectations and more appropriate career goals and strategies (Pedro, 1984; Gardner & Lambert, 1993).

Another benefit and prime motivation for interns is the acquisition of specific job skills. On-the-job training is a central component of internships, and students can use hands-on practice of specialized skills. Training programs and acquired skills often can be translated into powerful resume material, and provide graduating interns with a clear, competitive edge over other graduates.

Work experience before graduation provides more than practical job training and skills. It also contributes to an individual's personal development in a number of ways. Part-time
positions, internships in particular, provide opportunities to take on professional level responsibilities despite limited experience. Such opportunities develop self-reliance, self-confidence and responsibility (Kerka, 1989).

Roark, in her 1983 paper concerning students who work on campus, discusses how employed students gain confidence themselves as workers. Through work experiences, students develop greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, values and goals. Student employment “promotes developmental growth in college students in ways that are not available through academic and social experience alone. Values, skills, emotional maturity, personal identity and integrity are fostered through employment experiences” (Roark, 1983).

**Student/Workers Or Worker/Students?**

All of these benefits discussed make the student with work experience before graduation much more valuable in the job market. Bentia Myers, an accountant for the IRS, speaking of this advantage commented, “An employer can always tell the difference when interviewing a student who has been out there in an internship. There is increased maturity and knowledge of the field and experience gained which makes a big difference” (S.F.S.U. Career Guide, 1993).

Powerful resumes and confident interviewing, clear goals, and acquired experience and skills all lead to better job prospects for the working student after graduation, but such work leads to jobs in an even more direct way. Serving in these positions helps to develop a personal network for jobs, complete with professional contacts (Davis, 1987; Seibert & Sypher, 1989). Working, while one is a student, begins the process of networking early. Students are continually in contact with potential employers (Kerka, 1989). In a survey of Montclair State College interns, participating students reported they are “overwhelmed by the number of professional contacts they make” while serving in internship positions (Veenendall, 1983).

In addition, part-time positions can turn into full-time positions after graduation. When an intern remains with the employer of their student placement, graduates report a greater sense of power on the job and greater commitment and socialization to the employing organization (Brown, 1984). Data show that the cooperative education experience, especially, facilitates the transition from student to employee, and thus leads not only to jobs, but greater job satisfaction. Annual follow-ups of co-op graduates of La Guardia Community College (800-900 per year) indicate that 40-50% take jobs with their co-op employer, and their starting salaries are consistently higher than those of other two-year college graduates (Weintraub, 1980-1984).

**Volunteering Counts**

Volunteer positions can also offer students part-time professional work when paid internship or co-op positions are not available. Other than financial compensation, a volunteer position can offer all of the advantages of a paid position. There are also beneficial aspects specific to volunteering. Volunteer positions are often available in fields and agencies which are not profit-oriented. They may expose a student to social problems and provide an opportunity to contribute to the solutions of those problems.

However, even if volunteer positions are not served in areas or agencies existing to deal with social problems, the volunteer experience tends to make students more socially responsible citizens and fosters an appreciation of participating in their society (Swift, 1991). While the duties performed and job done will be as valuable on a resume as paid experience, volunteering tends to demonstrate greater motivation and commitment to the field to a potential employer.

Volunteer positions are a good alternative if a student is only able to contribute a few hours a week, needs more flexible “as available” scheduling, or has no prior work experience in a field which is competitive even for interns. Volunteering is also the easiest way to create a student position where none exist, and the valuable training can be viewed as a form of payment for service.

**Cries Against Student Employment**

Despite its advantages, student employment does not receive support from all quarters.
Many faculty lament the number of work hours students put in as detrimental to academic work, particularly in limiting study hours. As a result of heavier work schedules, students' time is less flexible for library use, field trips and study group participation (McCartan, 1988). Many also speculate that employment limits students' participation in valuable extracurricular activities as well.

In surveys conducted at five universities, Scott Schnackenberg found little difference in the way working versus non-working students spend their time. The only significant variance was in hours spent watching television: 51% of non-workers watched three or more hours a day compared to 34% of those who worked (McCartan, 1988).

There is evidence in studies on student attrition that one factor causing some students to quit college is conflict between work and school responsibilities. This is especially true for first-generation students—that is, students whose parents did not attend college. When faced with conflicts between work and school responsibilities, these students may see a job, not the college experience, as the key to their success.

This conflict is eased or virtually eliminated when employment is through a co-op placement or paid internship, which is part-time, integrated into a students’ academic work, and arranged with employers who are seeking and therefore cooperating with students who are carrying a class load. With work a necessity for many students and a student body that is increasingly working off campus, universities need to respond with opportunities for work which will enhance student retention.

**College/University Benefits**

If a university recognizes and encourages student employment as career entry level, there can be a significant ripple effect. Such support can have a positive effect on curriculum development, the quality of student life, and even the finances and resources of the university.

Faculty and administrators are in better touch with the needs of the working world and the efficacy of academic programs to the workplace (Siebert & Sypher, 1989). This impacts the curriculum, testing and upgrading it to keep in step with the world outside the campus. Kerka (1989) refers to this advantage as “workplace-tested curriculum.”

Improvements in programs and employment opportunities for the student body attract attention to universities and specific departments. They provide a highly effective mode of career education and a greater awareness of the employment opportunities in specific majors (Siebert & Sypher, 1989).

These improvements and greater recognition of a university’s programs can translate into increased enrollment. Increased enrollment, in turn, can mean more selective admissions as well (Roarke, 1983). Additionally, internship and cooperative education programs have been found to increase both student retention and graduate placements (Kerka, 1989). More job placements relating to their major secured by graduates also adds to the reputation and desirability of a university as a whole.

Involvement of students in the working world can make good financial sense too. The liaisons formed with the business community develop potential funding sources. Also, use of business and industrial sites for learning means less need to maintain expensive state-of-the-art facilities to provide hands-on training. Therefore, better use can be made of limited school resources and facilities (Kerka, 1989).

**Why Employers Are Switching**

Recruiting by way of student workers has been advantageous to employing businesses and agencies, whether the student jobs be co-ops, internships, summer jobs, part-time jobs, or projects. Student worker programs provide motivated workers, now and in the future, at relatively low cost. Indeed, some students even work on a volunteer basis, especially in competitive fields. Hiring student workers has given employers better access to women and ethnically underrepresented workers. Additionally, the career hiring of former student workers has lowered both recruitment and training costs (Kerka, 1989).
As a result of using student workers, employers have had first access to career-minded workers who are better trained, known, and trusted by the company. They have more realistic expectations than other fresh graduates. Student workers who are hired by their placement employers show better socialization and greater commitment to the employing organization (Brown, 1984). Companies also enjoy greater employee retention and higher productivity from hired student workers (Kerka, 1989).

An interesting benefit was discussed in an interview with Charles Kunkel, Senior Manager of Research and Development for Union Pacific Railroad. Mr. Kunkel's department uses several co-op placements from different universities. He reports that not only are co-op workers consistently motivated and productive, but the periodic influx of enthusiastic, competitive "fresh blood" has a positive effect on the motivation and productivity of older employees as well as exposing them to new ideas and information from the academic world (Brougham, 1994).

How Should Universities Respond?

Many college educators, although aware of the fact that the majority of their students hold outside jobs, do not respond to the situation in any way other than to long for the days when academia was central to a student's life and outside work was an obstacle.

There is ample evidence showing how work experience can not only coexist, but actually enrich academic learning. Since students who want or need to work will continue to do so, the best strategy would be to focus on improving the quality of that work and its relevance to educational, personal, and career goals.

At the high end, cooperative education programs have proven themselves time and again to be invaluable to facilitating school and work integration. Universities which have such programs in place offer a real advantage to their students, and should continually seek ways to continue and expand the scope of existing programs. Cooperative education takes advantage of the old adage "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" by outright sanctioning of outside work and making it a learning experience and a part of a student's academic life. Many institutions, however, are unable to afford cooperative education programs even if they have enjoyed initial government seed funding. Substantial resources would seem to be needed to staff these programs, and faculty must support the programs and see their value. Otherwise they will never be able to integrate work experience into the curriculum (McCartan, 1988). When resources are not available for a thriving cooperative education program, institutions must be creative and find other ways to respond to the reality of working students.

One creative strategy is to find ways to improve the quality of college-sponsored work, such as work-study. Work-study was originally designed to be a career development program with financial aid as the secondary purpose. Examples of programs which do offer higher quality work-study are cited in McCartan's article "Students Who Work."

Whither The Career Center

A more practical and far-reaching strategy would focus on the vast pool of opportunities provided by existing off-campus work already being performed by students. Practice of career strategies such as networking, skill identification, resume building, communicating, value clarification and confidence building, any student worker in any work experience can use the work as a step toward a career job before graduation takes place.

Some college career centers are getting behind this student-worker-as-entry-level approach. They are shifting some resources from traditional senior recruiting programs and spending some time coordinating with faculty in programs which foster student success in integrating learning and earning. Together, faculty and Career Center staff are focusing on and developing opportunities for higher quality part-time positions. They seek employers who offer such part-time meaningful job opportunities. They woo them, praise them and bring them to the forefront of the University's consciousness.

McCarten (1988) quotes the writing of Frank van Aalst who observed that "Adding a learning
component to . . . existing jobs is easier than designing an equal number of new, experiential-educational positions."

Even with no special programs or resources, faculty can play a role in making a students' academic experiences relevant to their working life. As McCartan (1988) points out, "At the very least, faculty could begin a course by collecting information on students' outside jobs (along with the usual questions about major, year in school, and reason for taking the course). This information can be used informally in a number of ways: to weave examples from students' jobs into lectures; to help students select relevant topics for research papers; to call on students to share how their work is related to the topic being discussed."

**Summary: Work Works!**

The most important factor, by far, in finding meaningful employment after graduation is work experience gained while still in college. It facilitates finding employment in two general ways. First, it makes students more valuable as workers by developing their skills as well as their knowledge of themselves and their chosen career. Secondly, it provides networking opportunities and allows the students to begin in positions that often develop into full-time, paid positions after graduation.

Simply, students will find ways to work while in college. Because this work plays such a central role in their future career success, it would be not only futile, but misguided, to discourage student employment. However, in examining the advantages and disadvantages of working during college, a profile emerges of the optimum work experience. The profile is a part-time professional position, of 10-20 hours per week, which, in some way, relates to an individual student's educational and career goals. Internships and cooperative education positions which are integrated into the curriculum represent the best opportunities for appropriate part-time professional positions.

Work experience which fits this profile is not only beneficial to students. There are significant benefits to both universities and the business community in supporting programs which create or support student workers. When universities approach the student/worker realistically, they will find opportunities to enrich rather than detract from learning. New solutions must be found to fully integrate "worker/student/s" into both the learning place and the earning place.

**References**


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**Donald A. Casella**

Donald A. Casella has been director of the Career Center at San Francisco State University since 1979. Before San Francisco State, he worked with internships at Birmingham-Southern College where he founded the Contract Learning Center. Dr. Casella received his Ph. D. in Counseling from the University of Southern California. He is the Past President of California State University Association of Career Center Directors and member of the Board of Directors of the Western Association of Colleges and Employers. He is author of *How to Find a Job in the San Francisco Bay Area,* and is active as a speaker, writer and consultant on the issues of career development and the education-work relationship.

**Catherine E. Brougham**

Catherine E. Brougham coordinates Staffing Services, a new program of The Career Center at San Francisco State University that matches students and alumni with requests from companies for temporary or temp-to-hire workers. She has a special interest in the integration of career and personal counseling and approaches work-re-