Conclusion

John N. Gardner

This monograph is the result of a joint partnership effort between the National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition and the National Student Employment Association. That partnership, in part, is a result of one of the most important discoveries of my career as a college educator, namely, that the in-college work experience is far more important than I might have initially recognized much earlier in my professional career or in my own college career. This monograph also is evidence of the valuable contributions being made to the sponsorship of student employment by the National Student Employment Association and to the level of professionalism NSEA has lent to this important means of supporting college student success. This monograph includes a number of testimonials which strongly support the value of having students engage in reasonable and meaningful employment during the undergraduate college experience. I wish to offer in this conclusion some final perspectives on this important subject, and especially to present recommendations to educators for the kinds of work experiences I believe each of our students deserves.

We are all prisoners, of course, of our own experiences and the paradigms in place during our own undergraduate years. In my case, that was the period between 1961-1965 when the vast majority of American undergraduate students went to college full-time, lived on campus, and did not work during the traditional academic year. As a matter of fact, during that era, we believed that part-time employment during college was something to be avoided, a dysfunctional interruption of the real college experience comprised solely of curricular and co-curricular activities. Personally during my college experience at Marietta College, I held a part-time job shelving books in the college library for only about ten days during my junior year. I quickly realized that this was not for me. I worked in the summers as a member of the United Steel Workers of America union at a factory that made beer cans. It was true torture for a college student, millions and millions of empty beer cans with not a drop to drink! It has taken me many years since that pre-1965 character building experience to recognize that for college students the college student work experience, especially when it’s part-time and on campus, has many positive benefits for all the reasons argued so cogently in this publication.

The more I have examined the phenomenon of work during the college years, the more I have
become persuaded that the on-campus or off-campus work experience, as long as it is related or connected to the college in some fashion, is a way of achieving the benefits of involvement that have been found to be supportive of academic success and retention. Quite simply, employment during the college years is a way of increasing the amount of time, energy, and commitment to the total college experience which bodes so well for an enhanced probability of retention and graduation.

As we have admitted American college students in unprecedented numbers since 1965, we have also seen a period of unprecedented student bashing as a way of blaming American college students for unacceptably high levels of failure and/or other inappropriate behaviors. I believe that many of us are guilty of failing to recognize and commend the enormous numbers of our students who have worked, and worked hard, with distinction, before coming to college as well as during college, certainly in far greater numbers than those of us who went to college prior to 1965. It has been my experience that the vast majority of my students have been working hard, both in their part-time employment before college and during college, and in their formal academic studies. Their hard work in employment settings has involved the practice of many skills which are useful for life after college: goal setting, time management, learning to work with computers, practicing communication skills, demonstrating responsibility and initiative, achieving greater degrees of autonomy and independence, learning to work and live with those who are different, etc. I admire the students of today for their work ethic and their desire to be less dependent on their families through the work process.

I believe that those of us who have responsibility for providing employment for students during college, either directly in the units over which we exercise supervision or through referrals to agencies and organizations with which we have contact, also have responsibility for insuring that these work settings have the potential for providing a meaningful and positive student employment learning experience. To that end, I want to present the following observations and recommendations:

1. We must recognize that student employees are, first and foremost, college students. Their academic work must take priority. Therefore, the demands we make of them should not interfere with but should be supportive of their academic goals.

2. Therefore, when possible, we need to provide flexible work schedules or at least the understanding that when crunch time comes at exams, for example, we recognize that their highest priority must be studying for those exams and not working in our offices.

3. We need to take the position that college student employment is a laboratory, a learning setting, a powerful and vital co-curricular classroom with the potential opportunity for powerful learning outcomes.

4. We should recognize that higher educators who supervise students are acting in the role of teachers and models for professional development and behavior.

5. In light of this role of educational supervisor as teacher, it is imperative that we explain to students the rationale for their duties and the importance of their role in the functions of the unit or department.

6. We need to create for our students meaningful work, rather than making them "go-phers." By meaningful work, I mean some kind of work that will lead to positive learning outcomes.

7. We need to give students credit for the work they have performed (not taking that credit ourselves) and, whenever possible, include their names on written work that they have helped produce.

8. We need to be as inclusive as possible of students in as many functions of the organization as possible, for example, allowing
them to attend staff meetings so that they can see how the unit makes decisions, handles group processes, sets goals, resolves conflicts, solves problems—for better or for worse!

9. We need to demonstrate an interest in more than just their work behavior, duties, and functions. Instead, we need to inquire respectively, non-invasively, as to their academic success and personal adjustment to the campus and thus treat them as the whole persons we know them to be.

10. I believe that one of the worst things that we can do to our students is to underutilize them or engage them in work that is not meaningful. We need to remember at all times that they are in a formative period of their lives when they are learning their attitudes towards the concept of work and especially professional work. We need to remember that for many of these students, the college work experience is the first time in their lives they have proximity to working professionals. Thus, they are learning their attitudes not only towards work per se, but also towards professional work ethics, standards, and responsibilities.

11. We need to make sure they are carefully trained for the duties they perform, that they are evaluated for this performance, and rewarded commensurately. To the extent possible, the performance assessment needs to be a mirror and an analog of the process we use for the full-time employees of our units.

12. We need to convey to them proper terms of respect and address. We need to provide for them name signs for their work stations, list their names in our directories and in our publications where appropriate.

13. One of the most important ways we can support our students is to serve as references for graduate school and employment opportunities. We may assume that they would automatically call upon us to perform this important function. But I believe we need to make our willingness to do so explicit. When we are called upon to serve as references, we need to perform this task as thoroughly and as conscientiously as possible. This is one of the single most important forms of support we can provide for our students in this increasingly competitive and tight job market faced by our student employees.

14. Everything I know about the work world and life after college suggests that learning to work in teams is one of the most essential skills our students will be required to possess and to demonstrate in “the real world.” Therefore, students need the opportunity to practice teamwork in employment settings.

15. We need to practice the kind of inclusiveness in our own hiring patterns necessary to provide equal opportunity for all of America’s college students. To the extent we can make our own work environments during college a pluralistic, multi-cultural environment, our students will be more able to function in such an environment with success after college.

My thoughts about the kinds of work experience and environments that are needed by students during college have been influenced by a book “in progress,” as of this writing with Jossey-Bass Publishers. This work, edited by myself and Gretchen Van der Veer, is on “The Senior Year Experience.” Several chapters in this book consider whether or not college seniors are prepared for work, how they view their levels of preparation after leaving college and entering the work force, and of equal importance, how employers of college graduates view graduates’ readiness to work. I am particularly indebted to two colleagues whom I have discovered in the course of this project, Philip D. Gardner of Michigan State University and Elwood (Ed) Holton of Louisiana State University. Philip Gardner argues quite cogently that the mix of qualities and dynamics most sought from college graduates by employers are the following:
reading comprehension, writing ability (increasingly technical), numerative literacy (mathematics), science (especially applied physics), computer literacy, and domain skills specific to a student’s academic major. Balancing these skills are reasoning competencies which focus on problem-solving and critical thinking, and most importantly, learning to learn, interpersonal communication and teamwork skills; and personal skills, including time management, goal setting, commitment to quality, entrepre-neurialism which encompasses creativity and risk taking, flexible attitude, and openness to new ideas and processes. (Gardner, in press)

Unfortunately, Gardner (in press) reports that many employers find that college graduates arrive at their organizations unprepared in these areas: “teamwork, effective written and oral expression, interpersonal communication, flexibility, an understanding of quality, and producing innovative (entrepreneurial practices).” Gardner reports that “employers acknowledged that these competencies were a consequence of the changing demands in the workplace and realized that these competencies were more behavioral than knowledge based.” I would argue then that one of the most important obligations we have to students whom we employ in our own college work settings is the opportunity to develop and practice as many of the aforementioned skills as possible.

While we should provide an environment that is sponsoring, educating, nurturing, accepting, and recognizing of the primacy of their academic commitments, we nevertheless are doing students a disservice if the work environment we create is totally unlike the work world that will await them in their life after college.

In his chapter “Preparing Students for Life Beyond the Classroom: The Role of Higher Education” Ed Holton argues the existence of what he describes as “the paradox of academic preparation.” He writes as follows:

New graduates then face a dramatic culture shift when they move from college to the professional world. The work world is so fundamentally different from the world of education that it requires an almost total transformation on the part of the new graduate. And organizations want employees “who fit”... their culture and are quick to look for confirmation that a new employee will “fit.”

The paradox is that while the knowledge acquired in college is critical to graduates’ success, the process of succeeding in school is very different than the process of succeeding at work. Many of the skills students develop to be successful in education processes, and the behaviors for which they are rewarded, are not the ones they will need to be successful at work! Worse yet, the culture of education is so different that if seniors continue to have the same expectations of their employers that they did of their college and professors, they will be greatly disappointed with their job and make costly career mistakes. Despite their best attempts to make adjustments, they cannot adjust for educational conditioning because they are not conscious of it.

If seniors do not have any interventions and do what comes naturally, they will unknowingly continue to expect the work place to be like college. Many of the behaviors that managers label as “immature,” “naive,” or not “fitting-in” and which keep newcomers from being successful, are simply behaviors that education has not only tolerated, but rewarded and encouraged. In many cases, new graduates are simply doing in the work place what they have been conditioned to do for 17 years! And they do it simply because they are not being taught any differently, not because they are naive or unwilling to adapt. To compound the paradox, the graduates employers seek the most are the most successful ones who have learned the education system the best. Not surprisingly, they can have the most difficulty unlearning the more familiar educational process. (Holton, in press).
Holton illustrates these critical dimensions of the academic paradox:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>College</strong></th>
<th><strong>First Year of Work</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequent, quick and concrete feedback (grades, etc.)</td>
<td>Infrequent and less precise feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly structured curriculum and programs with lots of direction and tasks</td>
<td>Highly unstructured environment with few directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally supportive environment</td>
<td>Less personal support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few significant changes</td>
<td>Frequent and unexpected changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible schedule</td>
<td>Structured schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent breaks and time off</td>
<td>Limited time off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal control over time, classes, interests</td>
<td>Responding to other’s directions and interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual challenge</td>
<td>Organizational and people challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose your performance level (“A”, “B”, etc.)</td>
<td>“A” level work required all the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on your development and growth</td>
<td>Focus on getting results for the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and explore knowledge</td>
<td>Get results with your knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual effort</td>
<td>Team effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Right” answers</td>
<td>Few “right” answers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly all of us want our graduates to achieve professional success. But as Holton (in press) argues, we have a responsibility to realize “many helpful practices embedded in the academic culture have the unintended affect of hindering graduates in the workplace.” He argues, and I would concur, that educators “must strike a better balance between the supportive processes that aid learning and the less supportive, more ambiguous” elements and processes of our culture which do not contribute to a positive adaptation to the real world after college.

In conclusion, we (the staff of the National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition) believe that the undergraduate student work experience has become a vital component of the college student experience. And we hope this monograph will serve as a call for continuing research, debate, and discussion on the ways to more effectively connect work and the undergraduate student experience.

With the current economic reality and with increasing levels of educational debt, students are becoming more, not less, dependent on work. I believe our challenge is to acknowledge this reality and to exercise more influence and control over the work choices college students make. In balance, I see student employment as a positive dimension of the college experience and one that is adaptive to the realities of life after college. It is our hope that this monograph will help higher educators become even more intentional about providing students the kinds of meaningful work and learning environments that will ease their transition into life after college.
References


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**John N. Gardner**

John N. Gardner serves as Executive Director of the nationally acclaimed University 101 Program and the National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. Gardner is the nation’s most recognized advocate for first-year students and was selected by the American Association for Higher Education in 1986 as one of the 20 faculty in the United States for “outstanding leadership contributions to their institutions and/or American higher education.”

Gardner is the host and director of The Freshman Year Experience conference series which is entering its 16th year. He is the author and co-author of numerous books and journal articles on issues related to the success of first-year students.