The Student Employment Professional—An Emerging Partner in Student Success

Lee Noel

Not too long ago it was common for advisors to counsel students against working on campus during their freshman year. The prevailing opinion was that freshmen needed time to become accustomed to the responsibilities of classes and college life, and to learn to manage their time effectively before taking on the responsibilities of a part-time job. Becoming a student employee too soon, the thinking went, would be overwhelming. It would jeopardize students academically and set them up to fail—and ultimately to leave the college or university.

Recent research is showing us that this is not the case at all. We are discovering that, far from contributing to attrition, allowing freshmen to work on campus yields bigger retention rates. In other words, student employment, if organized and administered properly, can be a very powerful retention strategy, a means of ensuring student success and persistence on campus.

Before examining why this is the case, it is important for us to look at the factors which are generally linked with retention. The classic study by Beal and Noel entitled What Works in Student Retention (1980) surveyed individuals considered to be most knowledgeable about student retention at 947 two-year and four-year institutions. Respondents were asked to rank the importance to retention of numerous positive characteristics, using a scale from 1-5 (with 5 being high). The top four factors which emerged from this study were the following:

- caring attitude of faculty and staff (4.29)
- high quality teaching (3.90)
- adequate financial aid (3.69)
- student involvement in campus (3.30).

It probably goes without saying that most colleges and universities would recognize the strong influence they have on the first three of these areas. The institutions are responsible for the hiring and training of staff, for example; they can choose to emphasize and reward excellent teaching (or not do so); and they can decide to allocate a greater or smaller percentage of the budget to financial aid, and redefine how to distribute it. All of these fall within the traditional responsibilities of colleges and universities, and few people would argue that the institution can have a pronounced influence on retention in these respects.

The institution's role may not initially be as evident in regard to the fourth item—student involvement on campus. Involvement is a critical component of the student's success in and
satisfaction with the collegiate experience, and these in turn contribute to retention.

But gaining broad-based involvement is difficult. Time and time again, the same students participate and get involved and become part of the fabric of campus life while the vast majority of students are at best marginally involved with the institution. It is precisely this non-involvement that is related to attrition.

Administrators nationwide express great frustration over the fact that the very students who complain of “nothing to do” or of feeling distant from the campus experience never take advantage of the rich and diverse menu of out-of-class opportunities available on campus.

Traditionally, the institution has played a fairly passive role—that is, left it up to the individual student to take the initiative to get involved. But in fact the college or university can play an essential role in helping students become involved and engaged in campus life—and it is in the institution’s best interest to do so. Theoretical research, bolstered by campus-based experience, provides strong evidence for the case that institutions must take the lead in structuring opportunities for students to become involved with the institution.

Two of the most powerful trends today in retention efforts, in fact, are directly connected to this issue of student involvement. The first of these is the freshman success course which extends orientation throughout the student’s first term. These courses help students negotiate the new terrain of academic life and provide them with guidance and support to get them connected to the new environment.

The second powerful trend, and the primary focus of our discussion, is student employment. In searching for a ready and effective vehicle to increase the frequency and intensity of student involvement, campus administrators in ever-increasing numbers are turning toward student employment as an answer.

Student employees don’t have to seek out activities or affinity groups. Their student employment provides them with an easy way of belonging, a natural “tie in” to at least one office on the campus. This contributes to a sense of being on the inside, having insights about and access to people that others don’t have. Students often feel as though they have somewhat preferred or “VIP” status as a result of their on-campus employment.

Students who provide critical services and assistance within individual offices can readily see the magnitude of the contribution they are making to the institution. The feeling of being a contributor further heightens their sense of identification with and involvement in the institution, resulting in increased commitment to the college or university.

Campus work supervisors are ideally positioned to be highly effective “retention agents” for the students who work with them. In fact, students often say it is their work supervisor who knows them best—better than any teacher or advisor on campus. The best-of-the-best supervisors become proxy “moms and dads” to dozens of students (and over the years, to hundreds and even thousands of them). For many students, this relationship prominently figures in their decision to return to campus each fall.

Recent research supports these numerous benefits of campus employment. Stern and Nakata (1991) discovered the following: working does not lower grades; grades improve when the job is related to a student’s academic program; the more hours the student works in a campus job the more likely the student is to persist and participate in graduate study; and former student workers earn more than their counterparts the first five years after graduation. Stern and Nakata also discovered, incidentally, that the number of hours students spent in off-campus jobs was negatively associated with persistence.

Dennis (1988) found that student employment programs not only offer the advantage of productive work for students; they also increase a student’s chance of completing college. Dennis surveyed 100 financial aid administrators from colleges and universities across the country
representing 172,055 first-year students (and total enrollment of 833,790 students). The findings of this study indicated that working during the freshman year does indeed have a "positive impact on first-year students because it provides students with an inside view of the school." Dennis concluded that "working involves students with the activities of the university and provides social contact. Employment also teaches students how to better manage their time and can, at some schools, provide career-related job experiences" (p. 38).

Often, students who have substantial academic skill-building needs are precluded from having campus jobs. This may be changing, and evidence such as that from the Learning Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania may prompt further change. The Center allowed freshmen with academic deficiencies and other educational and personal support needs to become part of the College Work Study (CWS) program—with very positive results. For example, 74% of the student responses indicated that "the job was assisting them in learning skills that would be helpful in future employment." Also, 83% of the students stated that the job did not interfere with their study time. And 96% of the campus employers felt the program was highly successful (Ender, p. 177).

In short, studies confirm that on-campus employment (and it is important to stress on-campus here) can be a highly successful learning and social experience for students, as well as a powerful retention tool for the institution—providing it is a successful experience. Certainly this takes some concerted anticipation and planning as well as effort and monitoring on the part of administrators at the institution. Carefully managed student employment, especially at the freshman level, can be similar in impact to the kind of involvement that extending orientation through freshman success courses provides.

This is where student employment professionals have a critical role to play. First, they are in the position to ensure that students benefit fully from the work experience. Working directly with prospective student employees, student employment professionals match students and jobs on the basis of the students' interests and skills. They can also underscore the connection between campus work and students' career development, helping students see that the skills, responsibilities, and work attitudes which they both bring to and develop during their campus work have a distinct bearing upon their work after graduation. During and even after the completion of a campus assignment, students can be helped by student employment professionals to translate their successful campus experience into terms that will have meaning beyond the campus.

Second, through their role as coordinator of student work on campus, student employment professionals are in a position to ensure that students participate in a high-quality work experience. To ensure that the student work experience is beneficial to all parties involved, the coordinator must assume an active role with potential supervisors. This means the following:

1. Helping them "ready" their respective offices and the people working there for student employees

2. Developing office-specific training which includes sensitizing new student employees to particular issues (e.g. confidentiality of information)

3. Underscoring with supervisors that students are capable of meeting and even exceeding performance expectations, when expectations are properly set.

Third, student employment professionals are in a position to see that the institution receives real value for the resources it invests in student employment. Because so many student jobs on campus place them in a direct, front-line position (whether in person or over the phone), these jobs provide multiple occasions to represent the institution to key internal and external publics—campus administrators, prospective students and their parents, other current students, or even potential donors. This means that such interactions, while usually short, are powerful opportunities for the institution to sustain and reinforce its image.

Such interactions also contribute to the general climate of the institution and should be in
keeping with institutional goals. The student employment professionals who are able to connect their student work program with such goals (e.g., retention, productivity, sensitivity to diverse populations, quality service, quality performance) have taken an important step in creating a positive situation for current students, prospective students, and the institution as a whole.

If quality service to all constituents is a priority, for example, it will be an expectation for all campus employees—including student employees—that they learn to “go the extra mile.” This then becomes part of the normal routine rather than the exception. The attitudes student employees ideally bring to their campus work—responsiveness, approachability, and understanding—put them first in line to influence other students and thus act as retention agents in their own right.

Responsibility for pre-employment training for students is often dispersed or non-existent on campuses today. Yet this is a critical task which ideally could be coordinated by the student employment administrator. Training is the ideal vehicle to communicate to students key understandings about the importance of their work, and alert them to the fact that no matter how small or insignificant their task may seem, campus jobs are real jobs. As such, campus jobs contribute to the larger goals of the institution as a whole.

The use of student employees in key front-line jobs around campus may actually increase as budgetary cutbacks snowball on hundreds of campuses across the nation. Today, many institutions report that necessary daily tasks once completed by full-time staff members are now becoming the responsibility of part-time student employees. While they have always been important to the work of a college or university, student employees are thus an especially vital resource today.

When it comes to retaining students, intrusive, proactive strategies must be used at all institutional levels to reach new students before they experience feelings of failure, or disappointment. Professionals in the areas of student employment and financial aid are in a position to reach many students potentially at risk of dropping out. Student employment on campus may be a nearly ideal strategy for helping these students become a part of the fabric of the institution, with the resulting growth in confidence, competence, and commitment to the institution which that encourages. As institutions realize the benefits of student employment, many are putting increasing numbers of students to work—including those students most at risk.

Student employment is more than financial aid—it provides students with the social benefits, with the opportunity for involvement, and with the inherent pressure to better manage their time. In the long run it provides students not only with experience, but also with increased confidence in their ability to tackle significant tasks and relate well to many different types of people in the world of work after graduation. While providing such benefits for students, student employment simultaneously provides the institution with a high quality, responsible, and energetic part-time work force—with all the benefits which that implies.

Improving retention requires an institution-wide focus, and the student employment professional, along with the financial aid professional, are emerging partners in ensuring student success and persistence on campus. In the long run, student on-campus employment can dramatically bolster the total learning experience for students and yield greater revenue potential for the institution. At the center of all of this is the student employment professional, serving a pivotal and invaluable role both in the lives of the students and in the success of the institution.

References


---

**Lee Noel**

Lee Noel is the President of the Noel/Levitz Centers for Institutional Effectiveness and Innovation. He is nationally recognized as an authority in retention of students and consults, writes, and speaks throughout the country on this topic. He was also an experienced student employment professional in his early professional life. He has presented at national and regional student employment conferences on the value of student employment.