

Student Employment: The Next High-Impact Practice

Marianna Savoca, Kelli K. Smith, and Simran Kaur

How do we scale student participation in high-impact practices (HIPs) on campuses where there is limited supply? Student employment, not an official HIP yet, has potential to fill this gap. This article describes approaches taken by two campuses within the State University of New York (SUNY) system to transform work-study/student employment into high-impact learning experiences.

Literature Review

Utilizing data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Kuh (2008) highlighted and validated a set of effective educational practices correlated with positive educational outcomes—including deeper approaches to learning, general education, practical competence, and personal and social development—for students from a variety of backgrounds. This work led to a list of 11 high-impact practices (HIP) published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); practices that—when done well—share eight key elements (Kuh 2008; Kuh, O'Donnell, and Reed 2013):

1. High expectations for performance.
2. Significant investment of time and effort.
3. Substantive interactions with faculty and peers.
4. Experiences with diversity.
5. Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback.
6. Structured opportunities for reflection.
7. Real-world projects.
8. Public demonstration of competence.

Should campus employment be added to the list of HIPs, it has the potential to have a particular impact upon lower income, first-generation college students. Often such students have no other choice but to work to offset costs associated with earning a college degree (Savoca 2016), and Kuh's (2008) research found underserved students showed a higher benefit from participating in one or more HIP activities in comparison to the majority of students. Therefore, if structured with intentionality, on-campus jobs present the opportunity for low-income, first-generation college students to participate in a HIP while earning an income (McClellan, Creager, and Savoca 2018) and building career skills.

The link between career readiness and general student employment has been robustly explored due to interest of future employers and universities. For example, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators conducted a comprehensive study (Burnside, Wesley, Wesaw, and Parnell 2019) of on-campus student employment, which found universities aimed to provide career readiness skills training to student employees (Burnside, Wesley, Wesaw, and Parnell 2019). A later study of Federal Work-Study student employees investigated improvements made in skills before and after work-study employment (Akos, Leonard,

and Bugno 2021). Each study found positive, measurable gains in students' acquisition or improvement of career-ready skills.

Several studies use the eight National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) career readiness competencies (NACE 2022). A major advantage of this framework is that it incorporates early talent employer input. Furthermore, a large survey of stakeholders (future employers, industry leaders, university administrative personnel, and students) is conducted annually to measure which skills are most desired and are most commonly addressed in training, used in student jobs, and perceived as valuable or competent by both students and employers. Additionally, NACE provides robust background materials to define and explain the competencies, making it easier for stakeholders to apply them as consistent measurements.

Such research has led many career centers across the country to take on the challenge of elevating student employment as a more meaningful, HIP-worthy experience.

The Binghamton Approach

Binghamton University, in upstate New York also known as the "Public Ivy," enrolls over 18,000 students. Since the 2013 creation of their strategic plan, the [Road Map to Premier](#), HIPs have been a key priority and metric. Inspired by AAC&U's work, 5 HIPs—including internships—became undergraduate priorities to "provide a transformative learning community that prepares students for advanced education, careers, and purposeful living."

Initially without additional resources, the Fleishman Career Center took simple steps to prioritize student employment eight years ago. The focus was centered on equity, and the Provost willingly issued a campus directive for all student employment opportunities to be listed within the career center's platform. In the first year, on-campus postings increased by 132%.

Two years ago, the career center created a position entirely dedicated to campus employment. This effort includes student and supervisor trainings, an intentional focus on career readiness, student and supervisor award recognition, marketing, student reflection, and constructive student feedback. The career center models the university-wide effort with nearly 50 high-impact positions.

Student feedback tied to the NACE competencies to assist with student skill building and career readiness has been a key element of the program. One surprising finding in the first year was that Binghamton students evaluated themselves on the competencies lower (6.27/7.0) than their supervisors (6.43/7.0)—the only institution the vendor supported for which this was the case, indicating the importance of building Binghamton students' confidence in their skills.

This year, at the suggestion of the Fleishman Center and with the backing of their program's success, Binghamton decided to

add campus employment as a designated HIP within the strategic plan. This was also a result of an analysis of their HIP non-participant data and the student worker demographics; for example, first-generation, underrepresented minority (URM), and Pell-eligible students were more likely to be student employees, suggesting that providing meaningful student employment experiences will help increase career readiness for these populations. This also led to additional funding to expand the center's introductory student employment grant. The grant fully funds the wages for a newly created campus job intended for students who have never held an on-campus role. The position must meet the criteria for a high-impact practice by having defined learning objectives and requiring work on a project as well as student feedback.

The Stony Brook Approach

Stony Brook, the research flagship of SUNY, located on Long Island and enrolling 26,000 students, has been transforming student employment for 10 years. Campus leadership made the strategic decision to shift student employment from enrollment management to career services, which was known for its work with employers in creating quality work-based internships.

The Stony Brook approach to transforming work-study/student employment was informed by the AAC&U publication on high-impact practices (Kuh 2008), which also inspired a dissertation (Savoca 2016). The approach has two strategic goals: (1) build capacity among supervisors to infuse high-impact elements into work-study roles, while (2) providing training and professional development for students.

Supervisors attend individual and small group consultation about workforce needs, and collaboration sessions for exchanges and peer problem solving. A resource toolkit includes the Society for Experiential Education's Eight Principles of Good Practice in Experiential Education (SEE n.d.), sample position descriptions with learning outcomes, NACE Career Readiness Competencies (NACE 2022), and the IowaGROW model of reflection in student employment (Hansen and Hoag 2018).

A key feature of Stony Brook's program is the expectation that student employees will develop career readiness competencies. The Awarding Competencies for Essential Skills (ACES) recognition program awards digital badges for skills verified by the supervisor. Digital badges offered: communication, professionalism, teamwork, technology, leadership, innovation, time management, customer service, public speaking, and others. In 2022–23, 369 ACES were awarded.

Assessments were conducted in spring 2024 with response rates of 19.31% students (n=758) and 22.76% supervisors (n=154). Both groups agreed that nearly all HIP elements (high expectations, diversity, real-world projects, skills, relationships with faculty/staff/peers, and feedback) were included in the roles with one exception: discussions about connecting the job to academics and career (students: 64%; supervisors 88%). Supervisor responses were higher in every aspect except diversity (students: 90%;

supervisors 84%). This finding prompts questions about supervisor knowledge of various forms of diversity. Overall results suggest that campus jobs are indeed high impact. Further exploration of data will be conducted in the coming months.

Recommendations

While more research is needed to understand specific ways campus jobs can be transformed to benefit students in the same way established HIPs do, these two campuses have demonstrated that student employment as learning-integrated work can lead to career readiness (Savoca 2020). Infusing high-impact elements into campus jobs gives students the opportunity to develop career competencies, such as communication and interpersonal skills, giving and receiving feedback, conflict resolution, problem solving, time management, customer service, teamwork, professionalism, and leadership. We present these recommendations:

- Don't reinvent the wheel: use models that have demonstrated success and adapt to your campus.
- Begin with the end in mind: determine outcomes and metrics for your student employees in advance and plan appropriate interventions.
- Connect career services to the effort, regardless of where student employment sits on your organizational chart.
- Infuse high-impact elements into the roles and assess from the student and supervisor points of view.
- Start small, recruiting units on campus already providing developmental learning-integrated work experiences.
- Prioritize supervisor training as their role is critical to the student employee experience.
- Identify, celebrate, and promote your student employment champions working to elevate student roles to be high impact. Review the NASPA report (Burnside, Wesley, Wesaw, and Parnell 2019) for additional recommendations. ■

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Marianna Savoca is associate vice president for career readiness and experiential education and **Simran Kaur** is a survey research analyst at Stony Brook University; and **Kelli K. Smith** is assistant vice president for student success, at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

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Briana Alford is a learning specialist for the educational opportunity program at SUNY Broome Community College; **Sarah Celt** is Student Affairs Administration Masters Student, **Kylie Gottlieb** is a graduate student, **Aaron Mickulas-Mesco** is a coordinator for new student programs, **Aedan Sennett** is the Master of Public Administration Graduate Student Organization vice president of public relations, and **John Zilvinskis** is an associate professor at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

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Stephanie Roach is associate professor of English, **Jennifer Alvey** is associate professor of anthropology and women's and gender studies, and **Kazuko Hiramatsu** is professor of linguistics at University of Michigan-Flint.

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Jillian Kinzie is associate director for the National Survey of Student Engagement, Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University Bloomington.