

STAKEHOLDER BRIEF 2

Expanding Equitable Work-based Learning Opportunities

In 2021, the Project on Workforce launched the College-to-Jobs Initiative, a multi-year research effort designed to examine the connections between postsecondary education and the workforce. The initial phase of research culminated in the College-to-Jobs Playbook, a comprehensive review of the evidence and implementation of programs that connect students to meaningful careers. Through our research, we identified six themes that warranted further exploration. This brief explores the second theme: expanding work-based learning. We convened expert discussion groups to dive into each theme and conducted additional research to produce memos detailing actionable recommendations for three main stakeholder groups in the college-to-work ecosystem: educators, employers, and policymakers.

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High-quality work-based learning (WBL) experiences improve students' on-the-job skills and lead to higher future earnings.¹ Unfortunately, WBL opportunities are not universally accessible, particularly for students from under-resourced backgrounds.² In this brief, we identify actions that colleges, employers, and policymakers can take to broaden access to equitable WBL in college.



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What is Work-Based Learning?

Definition: Learning that exposes students to the knowledge, skills, and experiences required for a given career field, occurring in a workplace setting or an environment closely resembling the workplace.

Includes: Internships, apprenticeships, subsidized youth employment programs, co-ops, and experiential learning programs.

Why it matters: Students who engage in different types of WBL are more likely to complete college,³ develop skills crucial for the workplace (e.g., durable skills),⁴ build social capital,⁵ and experience greater career satisfaction.⁶ WBL is advantageous for employers as well, allowing them to establish direct pipelines to skilled talent pools.⁷

Challenges to Forming WBL Programs

Insufficient resources

Compensating students who participate in WBL experiences outside of the classroom is crucial to ensuring all students can participate,⁸ but many postsecondary institutions and employers are hesitant or unable to pay students.⁹ In addition, developing and administering high-quality WBL experiences can be resource-intensive, and some institutions and employers are unable or unwilling to invest in such programs.

Information gaps

Many employers are unaware of the business benefits of WBL and the steps required to establish WBL programs with colleges, preventing opportunities from materializing.¹⁰ Students may also be unaware of certain WBL opportunities and processes, causing them to miss out on valuable experiences.

Stakeholder misalignment

Coordinating programs across different stakeholders (i.e. employers and educators) is important for aligning WBL with student learning goals and industry requirements, but it can be difficult to communicate and collaborate across silos.¹¹

Equity and access challenges

WBL can advance economic opportunity for students from marginalized backgrounds, but ensuring that those opportunities are accessible to all students requires additional attention, and, at times, resources.¹² Programs should address barriers, such as inadequate transportation, childcare, and scheduling constraints, which may prevent certain learners from engaging in WBL experiences.¹³



Guiding Principles

Compensate students for their work

Paying students for WBL ensures that all individuals, regardless of their available resources, have the opportunity to participate. Pay also incentivizes employers to fully commit to delivering high-quality programs that mutually benefit both students and businesses alike.

Establish cross-sector partnerships that integrate work and learning goals

Cross-sector partnerships enable WBL experiences to more closely align work tasks with learning goals.¹⁴ Successful WBL programs often require substantial dedicated resources, which can be shared through cross-sector partnerships.

Design opportunities with a focus on equity

Stakeholders must center equity and inclusion when designing WBL experiences. For example, they can build in flexible scheduling options, offer wraparound supports like transportation and childcare, and train managers to be mindful of cultural differences in norms and expectations. They should also be intentional about recruiting students from underrepresented backgrounds, who may not be aware of the opportunities.

Collect and share disaggregated data

Stakeholders should collect and report participant data from WBL programs to contribute to a shared understanding of what practices work best and why. Data should be broken down by race, gender, and socioeconomic status to identify disparities in access or outcomes and allow for targeted support.



Recommendations

Policymakers

1 Launch a Federal Work Study (FWS) Pilot that aligns student career interests with work opportunities.

Approximately 90 percent of FWS opportunities take place on-campus,¹⁵ removed from many real-world career pathways. The Department of Education should create a pilot program to test practices that align FWS opportunities with career pathways that lead to quality jobs, both on- and off-campus. The pilot should increase the amount of money awarded to each student. Policymakers should also experiment with new funding formulas that take into consideration the proportion of Pell-eligible students at the institution. This would expand access to FWS funds for institutions like community colleges, which have historically had limited allotments.

2 Award grants for paid internship and apprenticeship programs in critical industries, with funding dedicated to wraparound services.

State governments should consider establishing grants that subsidize internship and apprenticeship programs in key industries, with funding dedicated to subsidizing wraparound supports, such as childcare, transportation, and housing. Funding should be targeted at small-sized businesses, which benefit more significantly from additional financing to develop such programs.

EXAMPLES

With funding from The CARES Act, the state of Texas established two Work-based Learning Opportunity Grants directed at the creation and expansion of internship and apprenticeship programs.¹⁶ In Florida, the state subsidizes fees or tuition for students enrolled in the Florida College System, state university, or school district workforce education program who also participate in registered apprenticeship programs.¹⁷

3 Expand subsidized youth employment programs.

Subsidized youth employment programs (SYEPs) have a track-record of improving academic and employment outcomes for at-risk youth.¹⁸ A significant portion of SYEPs rely on city or county general funds, which are vulnerable to budget volatility.¹⁹ The federal government should establish reliable federal funding streams, either through WIOA or standalone legislation, to expand access to subsidized youth employment across the country.



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- 4 Require that federal- and state-run internship programs compensate interns.**

Many internships are offered through state and federal agencies, but not all of these experiences are compensated.²⁰ State and federal governments should require—and appropriate funding for— fair pay for interns.
 - 5 Establish a tax credit to help small businesses establish high-quality WBL programs.**

Small businesses often lack the resources required to establish quality paid internship programs. Introducing a federal tax credit aligned with the criteria set by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) could help alleviate this burden, while encouraging employers to develop robust programs. The credit could be styled after the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), which is currently available to employers for “Summer Youth Employees” – individuals aged 16 or 17 who are employed between May 1 and September 15.²¹
- EXAMPLE**

In 2017, the United Kingdom introduced an Apprenticeship Levy, which places a 0.5% payroll tax on large employers, in turn granting employers access to funds for apprenticeship training costs.²²
- 6 Collect disaggregated national- and state-level data on WBL programs.**

Federal and state agencies should collect systems- and student-level data on WBL, providing transparency around key indicators and outcomes. The federal government might do so by including questions on WBL on employment surveys administered by the U.S. Census Bureau. Policymakers might also mandate that such data be collected as a requirement for accessing government funds.



Higher Education Institutions

Establish processes and structures that facilitate the development and integration of WBL across the institution.

1 Designate a single school unit to play a leadership role in WBL (e.g. Career Services), granting that unit the authority to make important decisions.

For WBL to become an institutional priority, colleges must establish a dedicated unit responsible for designing and implementing policies and programs that encourage WBL on campus. This unit should serve as the direct contact for employers and be responsible for:

- ▶ Building partnerships with regional and national employers.
- ▶ Managing on- and off-campus internship opportunities, as well as career-oriented FWS opportunities.
- ▶ On-campus interviewing and employer events.
- ▶ Developing employer guidelines for designing WBL programs.
- ▶ Forming partnerships with faculty to embed WBL into their curricula.
- ▶ Collecting data on student internships and other WBL opportunities.

2 Develop a plan for incorporating WBL into every students' college journey.

Create a university-wide plan that outlines the goals, steps, and resources required to integrate WBL into the student experience. This might include requiring students to enroll in WBL courses as part of their core curriculum, recognizing internships on academic transcripts, and/or incentivizing faculty to introduce WBL into their classrooms.

3 Integrate WBL into coursework.

Faculty should embed experiential and WBL experiences into their curricula, providing students with an applied understanding of work-related projects and foundational skills, such as effective teamwork and the application of critical thinking.

4 Embed mentorship programs into on-campus jobs.

There is growing evidence that mentors can promote college students' career self-efficacy, leading to positive outcomes with respect to career selection, job application, professional skill development, and growing networks.²³ By embedding mentorship into on-campus employment, institutions can enhance students' professional development and complement their classroom learning.



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- 5 Establish financial support mechanisms to compensate student interns.**

Colleges should establish dedicated funding pools that students can access to subsidize their internship experiences. Funding allocations should prioritize students working in unpaid internships or those requiring additional financial assistance. Colleges should consider establishing automatic qualification for students who are Pell-eligible, removing the administrative hurdles associated with applying for funding. As highlighted in Matthew Hora's research, Sacramento State University in California established the Gaining Access to Internships (GAIN) Fund that awards low-income students who participate in unpaid academic internships or internships that do not cover living expenses up to \$1,500 a semester.²⁴
- 6 Award credit for WBL experiences.**

Many students engage in work experiences outside of the classroom that equip them with valuable skills and knowledge. Colleges should recognize and award credit for current and past work, if it is aligned with postsecondary learning goals. Various methods exist for assessing prior work, including examinations and faculty reviews.²⁵ Credit for such learning not only accelerates students' progress towards obtaining credentials, but offers significant cost savings and can boost learners' completion rates.²⁶
- 7 Limit internship postings on campus or school-affiliated platforms to paid opportunities.**

To encourage employers to pay their student workers, higher education institutions should favor posting paid opportunities, while limiting the promotion of unpaid work opportunities on their campuses.



Employers

1 Incorporate internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships into the business growth strategy.

In today's highly competitive labor market, employers face significant challenges recruiting talent for key roles. Paid internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships can serve as direct pipelines for skilled talent, playing a key role in a sustainable business growth strategy. To incentivize employee participation in WBL programs, companies should tie such activities to career advancement opportunities. This will signal to employees that their time is valued.

2 Compensate students for WBL.

Although students are learning on the job, they are also providing labor and services that contribute to the success of the organization. Employers should compensate student workers for these contributions. This will ensure that students who do not have the resources to devote to unpaid work can participate in valuable WBL experiences, while enabling businesses to build more diverse talent pipelines. Additionally, pay demonstrates that the company is willing to invest in its employees, a factor that many individuals prioritize when making career decisions.²⁷

3 Build partnerships with colleges, with a focus on HBCUs and MSIs, and align student work opportunities with degree programs.

Employers should proactively forge partnerships with regional colleges, particularly HBCUs and MSIs, designing programs that meet industry needs and add value over students' lifetime. Work experiences should align with learning goals, which enables academic institutions to award credit for the experience. Partnerships at the institutional level can manifest in the form of formal co-op programs (e.g. Northeastern's co-op model) and apprenticeship programs. Employers can also leverage student-connected portals, such as Handshake,²⁸ to recruit students for WBL.

4 Design WBL programs intentionally, with an eye towards quality.

WBL programs should include meaningful job tasks that build foundational and technical career skills for students and add value for businesses. Students should be paired with trained supervisors and exposed to career and networking opportunities across the organization. For students who do not have previous exposure to professional environments, guidance and mentorship is particularly valuable and helps foster stronger connections to the workplace.



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5

Leverage federal, state, and local resources to finance WBL programs.

Many states offer funds that workforce boards, education institutions, and employers can tap into to finance student internship and apprenticeship opportunities. Employers should explore whether their chambers of commerce or industry associations have established or are willing to organize funds dedicated to student WBL experiences. Participating in regional industry partnerships provides a coordinated way to address talent needs and alleviate the administrative burden involved in forming multiple educator-employer relationships.²⁹ Intermediaries can also help bridge employers and colleges, assist with program administration, and provide funding and wraparound services. Examples of intermediaries already doing this work include CareerWise³⁰ and OneTen.³¹

EXAMPLE

The Greater Washington Partnership is an alliance of cross-sector employers in the Washington D.C. area. Identifying that there would be a dearth of digital tech talent by 2025, the partnership launched its CoLAB program, bringing together institutions of higher education with employers to build pathways that incorporate WBL opportunities.³² The Next Generation Sector Partnership Training Manual is one resource employers can use to understand the steps and best practices for forming industry partnerships.³³



Additional Resources

“Unpaid internships and inequality: A review of the data and recommendations for research, policy, and practice. Policy Brief #2,” Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this policy brief, the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions outlines policy solutions and recommendations for expanding paid internship opportunities.

Work-based Learning Toolkit, U.S. Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education has created a toolkit that offers state and local program administrators information on developing WBL experiences. The toolkit provides guidelines and resources on creating a state WBL strategy, encouraging employer engagement, collecting data, and scaling effective programs.

“Making Work-based Learning Work,” Jobs for the Future (JFF)

This paper from JFF addresses challenges to the wider adoption of WBL and offers a compelling framework to apply to design effective WBL practices.

“The Power of Work-Based Learning”, Strada Education Foundation

In this report, Strada releases key findings from three national surveys that examined the applied connections between education and work, revealing the benefits of WBL.

“Learning While Earning: The New Normal”, The Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), Georgetown University

In this report, CEW profiles the 14 million college students who are working while learning, presenting the challenges that working learners face and offering policy solutions to help these students succeed.



Endnotes

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