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Earning and Learning: Undergraduate Student Employment and The Importance of Relevant Work

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Undergraduate Student Employment and The Importance of Relevant Work

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

They say that it takes a village to raise a child. A child's development is not just the responsibility of his or her parents, but that of all members of the community. This of course includes teachers and caregivers, but I've always thought it extends beyond, as well, to the child's interactions and everyday experiences throughout the community. Children are learning all the time, assimilating new information and making connections to what they already know. With every bus ride, trip to the supermarket or hardware store, and visit to the zoo or playground the child engages with community members who shape their understanding of the world.

As the child grows and becomes a contributing member of their community, the village offers new learning opportunities. Their first lemonade stand is a lesson in economics, their lawn-mowing gig a lesson in dependability, their first baby-sitting job a chance to prove their maturity and responsibility. These experiences continue to rely on the adults in the community to be good-natured, patient, and trusting participants, but now the community also begins to benefit from these transactions. The relationship becomes one of mutual benefit to the child and the village – of give-and-take. But throughout it all, there remains an understanding in place that the child is benefiting in ways beyond just the small financial gains - most friendly neighbors in the community are willing to pay a little extra for a service they don't really need or could find elsewhere because it means they are giving the child a valuable learning experience.

As the child continues to grow, this expectation of mutual benefit seems to diminish. Work becomes an obligation, and the notion of mental enrichment fades from

the transaction. The child's paycheck becomes the only compensation for their work, and although the child gladly accepts, as the extra pocket money is likely their top priority as well, the loss of these additional benefits from the transaction means that there's simply less to be gained. The norm of adults working together to raise the child fades from the equation as well. The child is left to fend for themselves, with fewer community members to advocate for them outside of their immediate support system.

When a child leaves their village to attend college, they enter into a new community that in many ways is structured like a village in its own right. Colleges have their own dining options, their own entertainment scene, and of course their own residential space. Many colleges take the village metaphor even further, blurring the line with a dedicated college town. This is certainly the case where I live and work at Miami University, located in Oxford, Ohio, a town of around 20,000 that swells to nearly 40,000 when the students are on campus. The students are some of the primary customers for the town's businesses, and the college is far and away the largest employer in the town (City of Oxford Community Profile, 2020). I work in technology at the University's Brick & Ivy Campus Store. As a campus Apple Store as well as authorized Dell repair center and retailer, our presence allows the students to take care of their technology needs without ever having to leave the comfort of their "village." Students can purchase their laptops from us and bring them back to us for support and repairs. The next closest Apple store is 45 minutes away in Cincinnati, so our patrons include community members who are unaffiliated with the university as well, along with many Miami retirees who continue to rely on us. Our store is just one example of how the college functions as a self-contained

village itself, with internal businesses providing goods and services for the University community.

Like with the village approach to raising children, this University village is populated with adults in the form of faculty and staff similarly dedicated to the mission of child raising, through continuing the student's education. Professors are dedicated to the academic growth of the student, but also avail themselves in other ways to support the student's needs. Administrators understand that it's the first time many of these students are living away from home and act *in loco parentis* to ensure that the students are happy and safe, while other support staff provide for the students' other needs.

Yet unlike in the earlier stages of childhood, the "it takes a village" idiom doesn't seem to extend beyond the student's teachers and caregivers. It still doesn't extend to jobs, such as the part-time work that college students so often take on. Student employees seem to be seen as more of a resource than a shared responsibility, and the give-and-take relationship remains absent. In need of an income to help pay tuition or supply pocket money for other expenses, many students turn to these part-time jobs. But gone is the level of coddling that may have been present in earlier childhood jobs or even in other non-employment related areas around the university. The job is the job and the education is the education, and there is very little overlap.

This is unfortunate, as part-time work could provide a unique opportunity for students to gain practical, hands on experience to aid their future career development. By not providing better opportunities for students to make connections between their part-time work and their academic goals, we are missing out on a potentially rich source of valuable life experience that would help lead the students further down their future career

paths, which is of course the ultimate goal of most students attending university in the first place.

The fact that we are not taking better advantage of these opportunities is especially unfortunate given the disparity of need for part-time work between students of different economic backgrounds. For some students the income is imperative, while for others it is merely a luxury and thus a lower priority. For still others part-time work is an inconvenience they can simply avoid, not needing the income and able to focus their time on their studies instead. By not better connecting the part-time work experience with a student's academic goals, we are especially failing these lower-income students who now have to devote time out of their already busy schedules to a job that is not providing any academic benefit. Although they may be earning a paycheck, those hours spent at their place of employment become lost hours.

If we applied the "it takes a village" mentality to part-time student employment, could we mitigate this disparity and help student employees make better use of their limited available time? To do this, perhaps we need to abandon this separation between work and education and start to consider part-time work an extension of the academic portion of college, turning it into a true work-study experience, and re-establishing the give-and-take nature of many earlier childhood jobs. If employers considered furthering the education of their employees an essential part of the transaction of part-time employment, students would be able to get more out of their work experience and their college experience alike, and perhaps their performance in both areas could be improved.

One way to make part-time work more meaningful would be to find ways to help it better overlap with the student's field of study. Since the goal of many students in

college is to get a head start on their career, any kind of relevance toward their academic or career goals would increase that overlap and allow students to gain additional benefits from every hour they spend at their place of part-time employment. If the workplace functioned as an opportunity for them to practice some of the skills related to their chosen field, it could potentially increase their performance academically and their future career desirability.

In this paper I will explore the existing literature on part-time employment and college work-study experiences to see what role relevance has on job satisfaction and academic performance. I will report on some of the recent trends in part-time employment for college students, and I will review some of the reasons student give for working part-time during their college years. This will be followed by an examination of the downsides of working part time, which will help demonstrate why this research is so important, as students working part-time do suffer academically as a result. I will then closely examine the impact of meaningful, relevant part-time work, examining the short- and long-term gains and the students' perceptions of the benefits of jobs that align closely with a student's field of study or career aspirations. Finally, I will describe ways that colleges have tried to improve the work-study experience. Through this exploration, I will demonstrate that there is an existing gap in the research regarding the role that the employer can potentially play in making these meaningful connections and having a positive impact on their student employees' academic and career success.

In addition to the literature review, my project includes a professional artifact in the form of a guidebook that I have created for my student employees' first semester at MiTech. The goal of this guidebook is to turn their first semester of employment into a

sort of curriculum in its own right, a mutually beneficial educational experience that will allow them to flourish in their position while also gaining valuable experience that will aid in their academic pursuits and future career goals. The student employees will be asked to set goals for their employment, make connections with their academic coursework and career plans, develop skills in a thoughtful and organized sequence, reflect on their day-to-day experiences and growth, and effectively communicate with future employers about their job skills and responsibilities through the creation of a résumé.

In addition to the literature review and professional artifact, the remaining sections of this paper will include a complete description of the guidebook and a reflection on what I've learned from the experience and directions in which I and others can take this research in the future. The guidebook and this paper will serve as the primary components of my capstone project and my efforts to answer the question: *How can employers be more involved with their part-time undergraduate student employees' academic and career goals, to help them make the most of their work-study experience?*

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In this section I will continue to explore the question: *How can employers be more involved with their part-time undergraduate student employees' academic and career goals, to help them make the most of their work-study experience?* To do this, I will look at ways in which relevant part-time work leads to greater academic and career benefits for student employees. I will explore recent trends in student employment, then look at some of the reasons student give for choosing to participate in part-time employment during their undergraduate years. Next I will examine some of the downsides of participating in part-time employment before looking at some of the potential benefits that relevant employment can provide. Finally I will examine ways that have been suggested for universities to improve the work-study experience, leading me to the ultimate, relatively unexplored area of ways that employers themselves can make the work-study experience more meaningful and beneficial to a student's academic and career goals.

Recent Trends in Student Employment

Much of the literature concerning part-time work in college is in agreement that policy changes in many governments around the world, trending away from grants for higher education financial assistance and toward loans instead, led to a sharp increase in the number of students taking on part-time work starting in the 1990s and continuing through to today. This rising trend could be seen in multiple countries and was even evident when comparing one year to the next. Curtis & Shani (2002) examined the percentage of students employed in part-time jobs first by reporting across multiple

studies from 1993 to 2000, finding an increase from 27% in 1993 to as much as 72% in 2000, and then through their own survey, which identified an increase from 43% to 55% over just a one-year period. Hunt, Lincoln, & Walker (2004) reported similar numbers, finding that the number of undergraduates at a Northumbria university participating in part-time work increased from 37.6% to 48.7% from 1999 to 2001. Hall, Lincoln, & Walker (2010) noted a corresponding decrease in the number of students not working at all, from nearly half of students in 1994 to less than a quarter by 2009. Looking specifically at American universities, Wenz & Yu (2010) noted that in 2006 roughly half of students at traditional, four-year institutions were employed (a number that had increased from roughly one-third in 1970), while Tessema, Ready, & Astani (2014) found that 80% of American college students participated in part-time employment compared to 72% a decade earlier. More recently, Chu, Creed, & Conlon (2019) found that 78% of students in the United States, 75% in the United Kingdom, and 80% in Australia were employed, with a gradual increase apparent over the last thirty years. While there is some variation across studies in terms of exactly where the numbers stood at different times and in different locations, the overall trend of increasing employment among college students is borne out consistently across studies, countries, and types of universities.

This rising trend in the percentage of students working also carries with it a corresponding increase in the average number of hours worked by the students. Ford, Bosworth, & Wilson (1995) reported that 70% of students with part-time jobs were working less than 10 hours per week in the mid-nineties. Hunt et al (2004) reported an increase in the median hours worked from 12 hours in 1999 to 15 in 2001, while Tessema

et al (2014) reported that American college students were working an average of 30 hours per week in 2003-2004. Hall et al (2010) found a clear upward trend in hours spent working per week over a fifteen-year period from 1994 to 2009, while also identifying corresponding decreases in the amount of time spent studying and engaging in leisure activities. Tessema et al (2014) noted a similar downside to the increased hours working, in that time spent studying decreased from an average of 40 hours per week in 1961 to 27 hours per week by 2003.

The demographic data for those participating in this rising trend suggests that it has not been a uniform increase, and that students from lower-income backgrounds were affected more than more well-off students. Even as early as 1995, more than half of students with part-time jobs had loans, while only 39% of those who were not working carried loans. Similarly, 31% of those working expected no parental assistance with their education costs, compared to just 18% of those without jobs (Ford et al, 1995). Hunt et al (2004) reported a similar disproportionate number of lower income students working, with around half of working students receiving parental contributions compared to two-thirds of non-working students. Curtis & Shani (2002) looked at the role that shrinking government assistance played in this trend in the United Kingdom, determining that students needed an average of £5641 for their living costs while at the university but were now only receiving £3545 in grants and financial assistance. Hall et al (2010) agreed that the recent trends and increases in student employment can be attributed to the decrease of scholarships and other forms of student financial support. Wenz & Yu (2010) examined the effect of parental income, determining that the average income for non-working students' parents was $82,806, vs $69,671 for working students' parents. Chu et al

(2019), who specifically noted the increase among students working in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, indicated that the issue of steadily decreasing funding for college students is a widespread issue across all these countries and not limited to any one single government.

Hunt et al (2004) took this exploration a step further, pointing out that this inequity was hindering efforts to increase diversity in higher education: "Aside from the potential efficiency loss, there are serious equity issues arising from the growth in term-time employment. If the Government's objective is to increase participation from less well-off groups in higher education, hampering the academic prospects of such students is not likely to prove helpful to attaining that goal. Restoring grants, or at least seeking an alternative to loans, would have equity and efficiency advantages." The increasing financial burdens of higher education and government failure to address student debt has led to a very different landscape in terms of student part-time employment, and one that is having a negative effect on our lower socio-economic status students, driving a further wedge in the gap between the experiences of students of different financial backgrounds.

Reasons for Working

Unsurprisingly, student-reported data for reasons behind taking part-time jobs reflects the financial motivation behind employment. Ford et al (1995) reported that students viewed employment as an alternative to borrowing, showing a greater willingness to sacrifice their free time than to go into debt. 48% said their primary reason for working was because they had inadequate money to live on, compared to 18% who considered the income from their part-time job to be "extra." Others indicated that working part-time was part of an arrangement with their parents, and that they would not

receive parental assistance if they didn't also work themselves in order to pay for their educational costs.

Wenz & Yu (2010) had students rank five different motivations for working on a four-point Likert scale, with financial reasons the most common motivations ranked as "very important." Paying tuition was given most often as a "very important" reason, with 54% of students ranking it as such, followed by a desire for additional spending money at 46%. Interestingly, spending money was ranked as "somewhat important" by a similar number of students at 40% (behind gaining "general experience"), but paying tuition dropped down to just 25%, with fewer students ranking it as "somewhat important" than any of the other four reasons. This suggests that while spending money is a high priority for nearly all students, paying tuition is a motivation with more disparity, with some students considering it to be of the utmost importance and others not considering it as a primary reason for working at all. Similarly, Richardson et al (2013) had students rank their primary reasons for working, with "I need the money for basic essentials," "I can't manage just on my student loan," and "I have no choice, my family cannot help me financially" the three most common responses ranked as either *very important* or *important.* Other non-financial reasons, such as wanting the experience or hoping that it would help toward future employment, ranked fourth and sixth, respectively. Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) asked students to report their primary reason for working, with 60% giving financial reasons compared to 12%, 9%, and 7% respectively citing a desire to gain experience, practical skills, or personal skills, and 8% wanting to develop career contacts.

With so many researchers examining the motivations behind students' decisions to work part time, it is also worth exploring the reasons employers choose to hire student employees rather than full-time ones. Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) identified flexibility and control as overarching reason why employers might favor hiring student employees. Because student employees are not full-time, their hours can be increased or decreased as required, and the tasks assigned to them can change to fit the business's changing needs. Students typically work for lower pay with little to no additional benefits. In addition, students are often intelligent, strong communicators, capable of representing the business effectively and providing maximum return for what typically amounts to a minimal financial investment.

Downsides of Part-Time Work

The financial inequity behind the decision to work or not to work as a student is of critical importance due to the additional academic inequities brought about by that decision. If less financially well-off students are the ones consistently working the longest hours, then those students are potentially putting themselves at risk for negative academic effects, increasing an achievement gap among undergraduates based on financial security. Sure enough, the research supports the idea that working part-time can lead to poor academic outcomes, although not in quite so straightforward a way as one might expect. Working itself, it turns out, does not necessarily lower academic performance and in fact might even improve it, so long as the work performed is in moderation. But as hours spent working increases, academic performance certainly begins to suffer.

Tessema et al (2014) found that there was a significant but small difference in overall GPA between those students that worked and those who did not, with non-working students performing slightly better. However, when further separating working students into groups based on the numbers of hours worked, it was found that those working the fewest hours (1-10 hours per week) actually had a higher GPA than any other group (3.39), including those not working at all (3.34). This GPA steadily declined from group to group as the number of hours spent working increased, with the lowest average GPA among the group working 31 or more hours per week (3.24). Wenz & Yu (2010) found similar results, with working students actually outperforming non-working students overall by 0.09 points of GPA. Like Tessema et al, Wenz & Yu also reported a decrease in performance as additional employment hours were added, with a 0.007 point GPA reduction for each additional hour worked. Similarly, Robotham (2013) provided a qualitative exploration on student perceptions of an appropriate number of hours worked, and agrees that up to a certain point, roughly ten hours per week, students are able to manage their schedule so as to continue to be successful academically, while after that point they are no longer able to adapt to the pressures of the schedule.

Richardson et al (2013) also found that there was no overall negative impact on grades between working and non-working students, but did find that among working students, those who worked longer hours saw a corresponding decrease in performance. One explanation offered for this finding is that perhaps the students who choose to work part-time would otherwise naturally be better students due to superior motivation or time management ability, but because they put that extra effort into part-time work instead of academics, their academic performance is reduced back to the same level as their non-

working peers. This explanation is supported by the data offered by Tessema et al (2014) and Wenz & Yu (2010) showing that students working the fewest hours outperformed non-working students, as the relatively low hours worked by these students allowed them to remain academically ahead of the non-working group. Wenz & Yu (2010) found additional support for this explanation through examining students whose status changed from non-working to working over the course of their research. While working students overall displayed higher GPAs than non-working students, those whose status changed from non-working to working actually showed a 0.05 point reduction in GPA. Wenz & Yu (2010) also found that among their participant pool, working students had ranked in the 71st percentile academically in high school while non-working students had ranked in the 69th percentile. Both of these findings support the idea that employment itself negatively affects grades, but that the students who elect to participate in part-time employment are naturally higher achieving to begin with.

The reasons behind this reduced academic performance are potentially many, and multiple researchers have asked students to self-report on ways in which their employment has affected their studies. Ford et al (1995) found that 27% of employed students believed that their academic work standard had suffered due to their employment, while 30% had rushed to meet deadlines due to their job commitments, 36% had read less material, 41% had missed a lecture, 30% had handed in work late, and 14% had missed assignments entirely. Curtis & Shani (2002) reported 46% of students believed that they could have earned better grades if not for their employment, while 45% reported having less time to study, 26% reported difficulty concentrating due to tiredness, and 22% reported missing lectures due to working. Indeed, Curtis & Shani (2002) even

went so far as to ask students whether they'd prioritize work over school, with 11% reporting that the immediate benefits of work would lead them to put work commitments ahead of academic ones. Richardson, Evans, & Gbadamosi (2014) reported similar attitudes, with multiple students reporting that work would come before academics for the simple reason that, as one student put it, "work pays, uni doesn't."

In addition to the academic impact, multiple studies have found that part-time employment negatively affects time available for socializing and other activities. Students interviewed by Ford et al (1995) reported that work negatively impacted their social lives, with 53% cutting down on social activities and 67% feeling that they had less leisure time. Robotham (2013) also explores other areas in which student satisfaction might suffer, with students reporting not only that going out and social life suffer due to employment, but also a loss in opportunity for activities like visiting the gym. According to Tessema et al (2014), overall satisfaction among employed students suffered as well, through having less time for studying, social life, and school activities. Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) looked at the overall mental health impact of employment, suggesting that the combination of full-time study, part-time employment, and constant debt would negatively affect students' mental and physical well-being, and that attempts to address this stress by reducing debt through taking on more hours of work would have further negative impacts on mental health and academic performance.

Relevance of Part-Time Work

Because so many students are motivated primarily by financial considerations when selecting a job, they are not properly weighing other considerations that might allow them to gain more from their work experience and reduce some of the academic

detriments inherent in their decision to work. Greenbank, Hepworth, & Mercer (2009) noted that students prioritized pay and convenience when selecting part-time employment, lamenting that students rarely chose jobs that might be more likely to offer long term benefits toward their studies and their career goals. Greenbank et al suggested that if students were to select jobs with greater connections to their academic and vocational aspirations, they would see significant benefits and advantages in the form of improved academic and career status that would help alleviate many of the negative outcomes of part-time undergraduate employment.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of part-time jobs in which students participate do not relate to the students' field of study or future career directions. Hunt et al (2004) found that only 8% of student employees responded affirmatively to the statement "the job is related to what I want to do after university." Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) found that 62% of students were employed in hospitality and 20% in retail, fields that were typically unrelated to their academic areas. 80% of students interviewed by Hall et al (2010) reported that their employment had no overlap with their field of study, with the majority of that number employed in hospitality and retail. It is notable that the small minority of students for whom employment and academics did overlap reported that this arrangement was, for the most part, intentional. Of the 20% of students who reported that their employment was related to their study, half of them reported that gaining work experience was a primary reason for them working, compared to just 30% of the overall sample citing work experience as a reason for working. Only 6% of the students interviewed indicated that they were able to combine work and study without any problems, and all of them were part of the group reporting that their employment and

field of study were related. This suggests that if more students were to select jobs that matched their field of study through seeking them out intentionally, they would experience fewer issues balancing their academic and job-related commitments.

A few studies have looked at some of the potential benefits available when work and study do overlap, and the student's work experience is more relevant to their short-term academic and long-term career goals. Chu, Conlon, & Creed (2018) developed a congruence scale to identify some of these benefits. According to the scale, boundary congruence is the freedom for individuals to define their role boundaries in ways that align with their needs and the needs of people around them. As it relates to work-study, it means that the priorities of the student, employer, family, and university all align in a way that results in maximum student success. If the different parties' priorities are at odds with one another, boundary congruence is lower, resulting in lower satisfaction and performance and potential work-study conflict, which occurs when the two areas are forced to compete for the limited resources (such as time) that the student has at their disposal. When a student's work role and study role are aligned, such as when knowledge gained in academic studies can be applied to the job experience, role facilitation occurs, resulting in higher satisfaction and less conflict.

Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) suggested that students who could directly relate their part-time work experience to their academic pursuits gained improved academic knowledge and motivation, employment prospects, and job skills, suggesting that students working in a field relevant to their academic studies might experience a range of academic and vocational benefits. Gbadamosi et al (2015) reported that students achieved greater job and academic satisfaction when their job had a beneficial impact on their

studies, and when they were able to see a potential career path that led directly from their part-time employment, either through helping clarify their career choice or through continuing directly with their part-time employer after graduation. Wenz & Yu (2010) even noted improved academic performance for students whose employment related to their field of study: students who reported that they were working in order to gain skills that would aid them in their specific career earned higher grades by about 0.04 points of GPA, whereas those reporting that they were working for general experience not related to their career choice achieved lower grades by 0.05 points. Of particular interest to my research, Milosz & Milosz (2017) looked specifically at IT students in technology-related part-time jobs and identified specific benefits for those students. Benefits include the increase of professional skills, preparedness for future work, and an opportunity to gain practical skills that support their university studies. Despite greater congruence between work and study for these students, Milosz & Milosz (2017) still identified potential detriments in the form of reduced academic performance and potential loss of interest in the field.

It is worth noting that less directly relevant positions do still offer benefits to student employees beyond the simple paycheck. Curtis & Shani (2002) reported that less specific skills such as teamwork, dealing with people, customer service, and handling money were all potential benefits of holding a part-time job even if it was unrelated to the student's academic or future-career plans. Students in Robotham's study (2013) reported positive academic impacts of their work, such as a better understanding of business policies through direct application, improved decision-making ability due to the necessity of managing deadlines, sharpened communication skills, and even just the opportunity to

take a break from work and approach it later with a fresh mind. Financial independence was also cited as having an additional indirect benefit on academic success through decreased external pressures and stresses.

Ways to Improve the Work-Study Experience

A number of studies examine ways in which universities can improve the work-study experience for their students. Chu et al (2019) noted that Australian universities lose $1.4 billion per year due to students dropping out, citing this as a reason that universities should be particularly motivated to improve student satisfaction in this area and thereby improve retention. Broadbridge & Swanson (2005) stressed the importance of finding ways to optimize both work and study to provide maximum benefit for students, as well as for employers and the universities. They identify a problematic lack of existing research into this topic, speculating that addressing this gap would not only improve the inequities between working and non-working students, but also open doors for students who are at present unable to attend college whatsoever. Indeed, it is important to keep this third group in mind as well, as more manageable part-time employment options could indeed allow additional students to consider higher education who might not otherwise be able to afford it.

Little (2002) explored a couple of UK-based university responses to the growing trend of students working part-time: jobshops and curriculum frameworks that incorporate work experiences. Jobshops are dedicated administrative departments in higher education institutions committed to assisting their students in attaining temporary work, with the idea of bolstering their credentials for future employment opportunities. These jobshops provide a strategic opportunity for the university to develop their

undergraduates in additional ways, through directing their work experience toward more beneficial outcomes. The students, meanwhile, still meet their primary financial goals of employment while gaining additional benefits not found in the majority of part-time work, such as more relevant experiences. Curriculum frameworks, meanwhile, involve re-directing the curriculum to allow students greater opportunities to tie in and reflect on their work experiences. Gbadamosi et al (2019) explored work placements as a way in which academic departments could have a direct hand in finding part-time work for their students. Among these students involved in dedicated work placements, 77% of students reported that their placement was linked with their career goals, compared to just 20% of those involved in more typical part-time employment. Tessema et al (2014) suggested a similar approach, in the form of career services offices that can establish partnerships with surrounding business.

Other studies have asked students for their own opinions on ways that their university could better support their needs as part-time workers. Hall et al (2010) asked for suggestions from students for ways in which the difficulty combining work and study could be addressed. The most commonly given responses included greater financial support in the form of government grants, more flexible assignment deadlines, more online options, reduced workload, and greater scheduling flexibility. Barron & Anastasiadou (2009) asked students for suggestions for ways in which their university could play a more hands-on role in work placement, with just 9% of students responding that the university should not be further involved. Meanwhile, 42% of students suggested that the university could work directly with businesses to form links that would allow students to find appropriate work placement, and 32% wanted their university to offer

more flexible schedules that would better accommodate student employees' work hours. Curtis & Shani (2002) recognized that universities show much better understanding and flexibility when it comes to the employment schedules of part-time students, but don't extend the same level of accommodation toward their full-time students. Greenbank et al (2009) suggested that a more hands-on role on the part of universities when it comes to students searching for part-time work, and a more concerted effort on the part of professors to incorporate students' work experiences into the academic curriculum, would allow for better connections between theory and practice and raise the students' prospects in terms of career readiness and future job success.

While there has been some research into ways that universities can improve the work-study experience of their students, there is a significant gap in the research when it comes to specific ways that employers can assist their student employees. Of course, just as more satisfied students will have better outcomes academically, they might also perform better in the workplace. Employers should prioritize improving the work-study experience for their student employees in the same way that colleges and universities are attempting to do so.

There are many ways in which employers can offer similar positive support to their student employees. Liyanagamage, Glavas, & Kodagoda (2019) highlighted the importance of finding support from others within the students' professional and personal circles in order to maintain work-life balance while employed. Supportive workplace relationships, in particular, led to more positive emotions connected to their work experience. Specifically, students found it especially important to have individuals in their circle support and understand their efforts to combine employment and academics.

Perhaps this type of emotional support does not necessarily have to come from within the student's academic and social circles, but could be provided by the employer as well. Employers can also potentially offer the same kind of scheduling flexibility that students wish the university would provide. Robotham (2013) reported how students would like to be able to schedule their shifts around their academic schedule, but how the necessity of keeping their job might not allow them to do that, especially if a business employs multiple student workers all competing for the same shifts while balancing similar academic priorities. This can be especially problematic around the end of a semester when all students experience a similar increase in academic stresses and scheduling conflicts. New research into ways in which employers could offer greater flexibility during these times could potentially improve the experience of their part-time student workers.

One study that did examine the role that the employer plays in student satisfaction was Chu et al (2019), in which a work congruence scale was developed to determine student success with part-time work at a university in Australia. The researchers looked at the effects of family, leisure time, and university demands as part of the scale. While they found many familiar results such as the importance of family understanding and encouragement, availability of social and leisure time, and flexibility of academic schedule, they also identified the importance of the employer's role. Specifically, they found greater satisfaction when the work supervisor recognized the employee's dual role as a student and offered greater flexibility accordingly, both through scheduling and through providing opportunities for swapping shifts.

It is clear that there are ways in which both the university and the employer can improve student employee satisfaction, and better satisfied student employees will perform better in both the classroom and the workplace. There is an opportunity for employers and universities to work together for mutual benefit toward this same goal, finding ways to increase the overlap between the students' academic and employment experiences to allow them to maximize their use of their time, energy, and resources. It takes a village to raise a child, and to raise that child in the best way possible the various participants in the process must be aligned toward a common goal.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

As a MiTech full-time employee responsible for the supervision of around a dozen student employees, working part-time in the technology section of a campus store where they assist in providing walk-up technical support to other students and members of the university, I am in a position to apply some of the research on successful work-study outcomes toward improving the experiences of my students, and to continue to try to answer the question: *how can employers be more involved with their part-time undergraduate student employees' academic and career goals, to help them make the most of their work-study experience?* In this chapter I will describe the artifact portion of my project, a professional-quality guidebook that I have designed to aid my student employees' efforts to succeed in their studies, employment, and career-goals simultaneously during their employment at MiTech. This guidebook was designed to help them through their first semester at MiTech, when they're still learning most of the skills needed to succeed in their position. It is designed to be implemented early on in their employment, first through the completion of a "Getting Started" section in which they identify goals for their employment within the first few weeks of hiring, then through the completion of a "skills" section focused on the acquisition and mastery of techniques needed for success that can be completed over time throughout the course of the first semester. The skills section serves as an accompaniment to their hands-on experiences during that first semester, and allows them to pace out the skills over the roughly fourteen weeks of employment. The final section is to be completed in the final weeks of the semester and focuses on looking forward into the future, both into potential future

semesters at MiTech and, more importantly, into their future career plans, reflecting on ways that their MiTech experience can be applied to those goals through the creation of a résumé.

My project serves as a targeted effort to help the students make the most of their work experience, using some of the literature on coping mechanisms and the strategies that students use to succeed in their part-time jobs. To do this I employ some of the strategies for increased flexibility on the part of employers described by Chu et al (2019), and draw from some of the coping mechanisms described by Liyanagamage et al (2019). The guidebook also draws from much of the literature on the importance of relevance in work-study, as described by Barron & Anastasiadou (2009), Gbadamosi et al (2015), and Wenz & Yu (2010), and others. Since the idea behind a lot of the literature is to find overlap between work and study, my approach was to treat employment as an extension of their academic experience, designing a curriculum that gets them to a desired endpoint of clear career benefits and self-identified personal goals.

My employees are already at an advantage compared to many part-time working students in that they are employed in a field that aligns with their academic goals, as many of them are computer science students or are otherwise taking classes in technology. Not all of my students are computer science students, however. One of my students studies physics, for example, while another is in the business school. For this reason, I felt it was important to start off my guidebook by giving the students an opportunity to identify some of the overlaps between their job and their field of study, so that they are able to recognize the congruences that will allow them to get the most out of their work experience. To do this, I asked them to reflect on what specifically made them

choose to work at MiTech, rather than at one of countless other jobs available on campus. I asked them to consider what tech skills they already have and sort those skills into the ones relevant for their academics, career, and hobbies/leisure. I then asked them to consider the question "what do I want to get out of this job?" before finally giving them an opportunity to set specific goals in the form of an individualized education plan (IEP) that they would bring to a meeting with me or Kelly, their other supervisor, in order to figure out how we can support them in reaching those goals. On the IEP and in this meeting we would also ask how we can support their academic needs, acknowledging their dual role as both students and employees and hopefully fostering an environment that allows for some of the flexibility that Chu et al (2019) identified as a missing and much-needed component of part-time work for promoting academic success.

Another goal of this section was to have them open up to us, a crucial step in allowing us to be participants in their academic experience. As reported in the literature review section of this paper, Liyanagamage et al (2019) explored some of the emotional strategies used by students attempting to balance their work and academics. These strategies included suppression, reappraisal, prioritizing, and emotional sharing. Suppression specifically took the form of hiding negative emotions around employers. Reappraisal involved putting a positive spin on less positive experiences, such as focusing on the benefits gained from various job-related stressors and frustrations. Prioritizing involved focusing on one thing at a time and making a choice between different aspects of their work-education balance. Emotional sharing took the form of seeking out social support from friends and family members, suggesting that while suppressing emotions may be a viable strategy, sharing emotions with those in similar

experiences might also provide benefits. This study also determined that having supportive workplace relationships led to more positive emotions regarding the part-time work experience, and that students needed support from both personal and professional circles, in the form of individuals who understood and supported their efforts to combine academic and workplace success. By having the students share their goals with us, I hope to alleviate some of the need for suppression and replace it with opportunities for emotional sharing.

By filling out the Individualized Education Plan, the students are taking ownership of their learning and focusing their time toward reaching achievable goals that will help them in their future career plans. In the previous section I described how Wenz & Yu (2010) found that students who self-reported that they were working in a specific effort to gain skills relevant toward their anticipated future career achieved higher grades by 0.04 points of GPA, while those seeking general work experience obtained lower GPAs by 0.05 points. With this in mind, this Individualized Education Plan is meant to help focus their goals on specific skills and hopefully lead to better academic and career-related outcomes alike. To help focus their attention specifically on these skills, I prefaced the IEP activity with a series of activities in which I asked them to reflect on technology skills that they already possess, writing for 60 seconds without stopping to list as many of their tech skills as they could come up with, and then having them sort those into those skills relevant to their academics, career, and leisure time. These exercises encourage students to use one of the four coping mechanisms described by Liyanagamage et al (2019): reappraisal, which involves focusing on the benefits gained from situations in order to put a positive spin on our experiences.

Two of Liyanagamage's coping mechanisms that might initially seem at odds with one another are suppression and emotional sharing. Liyanagamage et al were referring specifically to the suppression of negative emotions around employers, but in emotional sharing they stressed the importance of sharing emotions with those in similar situations and with similar experiences. As an employer, I want my employees to feel comfortable sharing their emotions and struggles with me, so while I respect a student employee's right to privacy, meaning it's ultimately up to them if they would prefer not to share, I always want them to feel welcome to participate in emotional sharing should they so choose. With the Individualized Education Plan, my students identify ways in which I (and other full-time staff) can support their needs as student employees, both through helping them achieve their work goals and through helping them succeed as students. In so doing I want to encourage them to be able to think of me as a support person who is available to them should they need additional accommodations, offering them a sense of flexibility that Robotham (2013) suggested many student employees wished was present in their jobs.

During our initial meeting I would make sure to further reiterate that Kelly and I are available for emotional support as needed. During this meeting, I would make an effort to redirect some of their goals toward specific career-related outcomes, helping to make sure we make a concerted effort to achieve career-specific skills that Wenz & Yu (2010) identified as helping to improve GPA. Finally, some of the literature, such as Curtis & Shani (2002) and Richardson et al (2014), suggested that students were prioritizing their paid employment over their academic obligations. During this meeting I would make sure to dispel any notion that their part-time employment should be

prioritized ahead of their academics. I would stress that I do believe their academics should remain their priority for as long as they remain undergraduates. Prioritizing is another of Liyanagamage's four coping mechanisms, so this discussion would be an opportunity to use this skill.

The IEP and sit-down meeting serve as an early formative assessment to give me a chance to evaluate the student's early progress with the guidebook. At this time, I'd be looking to make sure that the student is taking the process seriously and engaging with the self-guided activities, such as the completion of the IEP and the listing of technology skills. Much of the next section, the skills section of the guidebook, requires them to record in real time some of their observations and experiences with the skills being covered, so through this early formative assessment I want to make sure that they are keeping an open mind and showing a willingness to participate in the activities, especially in recording their thoughts and ideas, which the guidebook relies on for success. It also serves as a pre-assessment, allowing us to identify the skills that they bring to the table initially and their goals for growth over the semester.

The skills section of the guidebook is the longest section and focuses on three categories of skills: "low-hanging fruit," or basic skills that will cover a wide range of the walk-up support that they encounter on a daily basis, more advanced tech skills that don't come up quite as often but require a greater level of expertise, and general job skills that require less technological expertise but are necessary in a wide range of fields. One common theme throughout this section is that, in addition to the specific skills that I've identified for them to master, I also ask them to come up with additional skills that fall under each category. For example, in the "low hanging fruit" section, I give three

examples of basic skills that they should learn early on in their employment, because they will come up often in walk-up support and will allow them to hit the ground running in terms of performing the actual work required of them at MiTech. These skills are PRAM resets, SMC resets, and adjusting DNS settings to fix wifi problems. All three skills include a guide for how to perform the procedure. In addition, I've asked them to identify up to three additional "low hanging fruits" by thinking about what other skills they find themselves performing often, and to write guides for those procedures as well. The design of these exercises draws from Bloom's Taxonomy, which organizes different cognitive skills into a tiered hierarchy, with higher-level skills representing greater mastery of a topic (Armstrong, 2010).
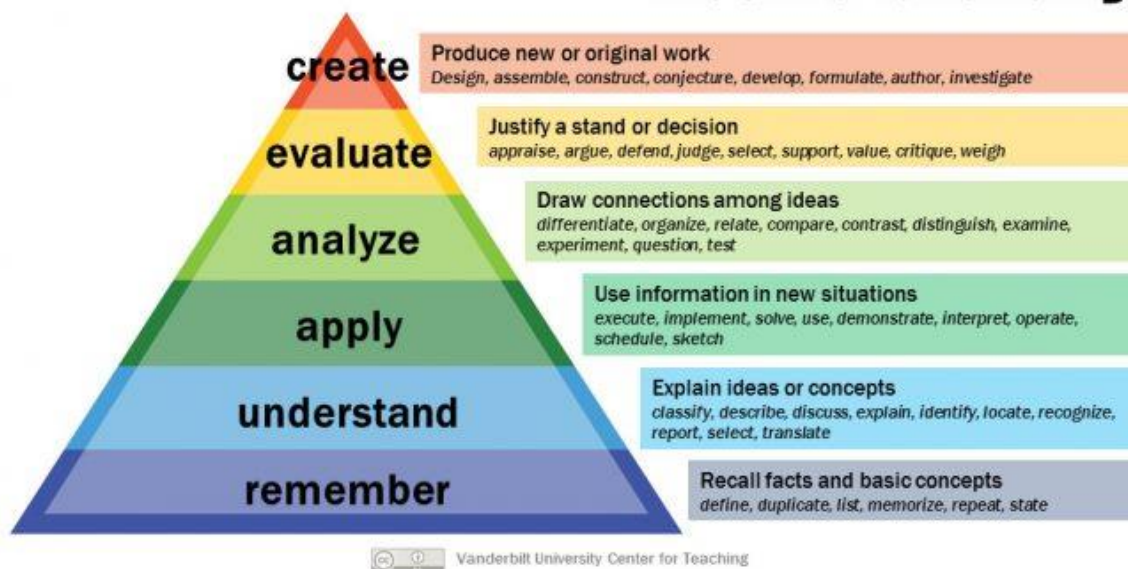
Over the course of these exercises I'm asking the students to apply multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy to help them master the necessary skills: at the lowest level of the taxonomy they are being asked to *remember* the necessary skills and basic procedures for the three skills I've identified. Moving up the pyramid, they need to *understand* these

procedures, and then *apply* them during walk-up support. In each skill I've asked them to come up with questions for me and Kelly about the procedure, thereby *analyzing* the procedure, and to *evaluate* the procedure by recording the situations when they were able to use it effectively. Finally, I've asked them to *create* procedures of their own for additional skills, producing new and original work that pertains to their own personal experiences at MiTech.

Once they've mastered both the simpler "low hanging fruit" skills and the more advanced tech skills (using Mac's built in Boot Camp program to install Windows on an Apple machine, and using our virus scan software and additional tools to remove Trovi, Searchmine, and other browser hijack malware), I ask them to do something similar with generalized job skills. I list a few general job skills that they perform on a regular basis (loosely based on the job skills of teamwork, customer service, dealing with people, and handling money listed by Curtis, 2002): answering phones, making sales, dealing with upset customers, and working the register. I also ask them to come up with additional skills based on their day-to-day experiences at MiTech, reflecting critically on what it is they spend their time on. This requires analysis and evaluation, two of the higher tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy. I then ask them to sort the various skills into categories of more general job skills, such as "customer service," "communication," "creativity," "organization," and "problem solving," which requires them to analyze and evaluate their performance as well.

The final section of the guidebook is called "Looking Forward" and focuses primarily on applying the skills that they've learned at MiTech to their future career goals by building a résumé. To do this, I have them return to the general job skills discussed in

the previous chapter and pick and choose some of the skills that they want to highlight in the "profile" section of their résumé. After going over some basic résumé formatting and the required personal information (name and contact information as well as educational background), I then have them focus on ways to include their work experience with MiTech and point to specific facts and figures that they can list among their skills, accomplishments, and responsibilities. Although there is no grade for this guidebook, the résumé-building activity serves as a final summative assessment in that they are required to design a final, tangible product that encompasses all of the skills they've learned at MiTech. In *creating* this résumé they are once again using the highest tier of Bloom's Taxonomy. The résumé assignment is supplemented by a reflection on the goals that they set at the start of the semester and a final meeting with me or Kelly to go over their experience.

Résumé building can be difficult, and for many of the students this may be the first time they've had to put one together. Being able to do so successfully while identifying specific job skills and technology skills that they've mastered during their employment is useful both directly (they'll have a résumé already made that they can use when they seek employment after graduation) and indirectly (they've learned some of the skills required when it comes time to update the résumé in the future. In addition, it allows them an opportunity for self-reflection on some of the benefits gained during their employment, once again participating in *reappraisal*, which is Liyanagamage's coping mechanism involved with identifying positive benefits gained from stressful experiences.

As final summative assessments, the résumé and final debrief allow me to judge how effective the guidebook was at achieving the goal of making their work experience

more relevant to their academic and career goals. Were they able to make connections with what they are studying and what they plan to do after graduation? Did they master the skills required, and any additional skills that they might have identified in their initial goal-setting period? Were they able to communicate those skills effectively to future employers in a way that shows their MiTech employment was a valuable experience?

In their dual role as undergraduates and employees, student workers have to balance multiple priorities. At MiTech, my hope is that the greater relevance of the work to my student's chosen fields of study will allow for greater congruence and increased overlap between the various aspects of their work-study experience, leading to better academic results and improved future career outcomes both, as well as greater job satisfaction and performance. Similarly, in my dual role as an employer and as a member of the university community, I find myself balancing multiple priorities, hoping to help the students' academic growth while also supporting the store's goals. With this project I believe I have aligned those priorities, allowing all of us to maximize the benefits gained from the part-time employment arrangement. By asking the students early on what they wanted to get out of their experience, I've ensured that they are benefiting from their employment just as much as we, their employer, benefit from the work they do for us, and through the various activities of the guidebook I can help them stay on track to meet those goals and develop their skills. This mutually beneficial relationship is a far more positive and productive arrangement for student employment, and one that I hope other employers may be able to emulate for the benefit of their own part-time student employees.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

For my project, I set out to answer the question *how can employers be more involved with their part-time undergraduate student employees' academic and career goals, to help them make the most of their work-study experience?* My project specifically considered this question within the context of my current employment at MiTech, Miami University's technology store and support center. Working as a full-time employee at MiTech, I help supervise part-time student employees (about a dozen during a normal, non-pandemic year) who perform much of the walk up support that students rely on us for, as well as assist in sales, customer service, inventory, and the day-to-day responsibilities of the store. To address this question and design a way for us as employers to be more involved with their goals, I created a guidebook to help my student employees make the most of their first semester of employment, turning the job into more of a learning experience and finding ways that we as employers can take a more deliberate, teaching-focused approach to our relationship with our student employees. In this chapter I will reflect on my experience leading up to and creating the guidebook, what I felt was successful and what I would have liked to improve, and some of the broader applications of the guidebook to other jobs beyond MiTech specifically, as well as implications to my future at MiTech.

Writing this guidebook now was opportune timing for me in a number of ways, both in terms of my personal career and academic trajectory and our needs at MiTech. In terms of my career, the timing worked out perfectly in that I'm finally back in an academic setting after a significant hiatus. I finished my elementary teaching certification

at Hamline in 2014, but left teaching entirely in 2016 when it became clear to me that I wasn't happy in my career and didn't think I ever would be. For the next few years I worked in mortgage and insurance sales, significantly removed from my teaching experience and not really applying any of my teacher training skills. My position at MiTech brought me back to an educational setting after a three-year absence, and has given me the opportunity to reapply some of those skills and interests from my previous career. While I worked in insurance and mortgage sales, it was hard for me to wrap my head around the idea of completing my master's degree, since it would have been difficult to make a meaningful connection between my employment and teaching and scholarship, but now that I'm employed at a university the time seemed right to return to and complete the last courses required for my master's. In addition, having that degree would be of greater value in the university setting, so the motivation to complete it was higher now, too.

Meanwhile, this was also an opportune time to bring some of my teaching skills to MiTech. This guidebook, and training in general, was something I felt was lacking at MiTech from the moment I started. I began my employment at MiTech in October of 2019, right around the same time as a new wave of student employees. In the months leading up to my hiring, MiTech had been particularly short-staffed in terms of full-time employees, and so there was an understandable gap in training and teaching procedures for the students. Consequently, it seemed as though some of our newest hires were very much struggling to learn the job, or even to know what the expectations were, when I started out. The lack of an organized training program was an opportunity for me to put my teaching skills back in use, designing ways to teach our student employees the

technology skills and job skills required to excel in their new position. Of course, I was also figuring out a new job of my own at the time, and with COVID hitting shortly thereafter, I struggled to find the time, energy, and motivation to buckle down and create a training program for the part-time employees. Returning to my master's was the perfect motivation to focus in and complete this much needed training program, and really embrace my role as a teacher and mentor to our student employees.

Creating this guidebook gave me the chance to teach the skills necessary to succeed as a MiTech student employee, but I wanted it to be more than that as well. I wanted to make sure that I was giving the students something that they could take with them, that would help them in their lives beyond the part-time hours they spend working at MiTech. This process highlighted for me the difference between *teaching* and *training*. While both teaching and training are concerned with the learner's improvement and development, training is entirely focused on the trainee's ability to meet expectations. This is true of employees, pets, even young children – when we train, we're asking the trainee to meet the trainer's needs. I wanted the program that I designed for MiTech to be more of a give and take. Yes, the employees would certainly be contributing to MiTech's success, and in that sense it would still be a training program to help them meet those expectations, but I also wanted MiTech in general, and the training program specifically, to contribute to the students' success, to *teach* them. To do that I focused in on ways that the program would be able to help them meet external goals – specifically, academic and career goals that might be relevant to the work they were performing at MiTech.

Where I know my guidebook succeeded was in the section focusing on the skills that students would be able to learn at MiTech. I felt as though this section captured the

mutual benefits of the teaching and learning experience that I was designing. The skills that I focused in on were specifically skills that I wanted them to be able to carry with them, both technology-related skills that they could point to in order to show tech expertise and more general job skills that would make them more employable wherever their future careers might take them. As I mentioned, the skill section was also a much-needed resource for MiTech, as these are crucial skills that we didn't yet have any sort of guided training for, and so I'm particularly pleased to have this completed and I know that we'll be able to make good use of these guides at MiTech. I have no doubt that I will be able to use these as direct instructional tools for my student employees at MiTech, and I look forward to putting this teaching opportunity into action.

I'm particularly pleased with how the résumé section came out and was able to connect directly back to the skills section, taking the general job skills that they categorized at the end of section two and later applying them in the résumé building portion of section three. To accomplish this, I used a backwards design approach, first recognizing that I wanted to use some of those skill words and categories for general job skills and then, once I knew where I was headed, incorporating those words and phrases into the skills section. The activity in which students are asked to sort some of their general job skills into broader categories was a direct result of this backwards design approach. Having not really had the chance to use backwards design or curriculum planning since I left teaching, I was glad to see I could return to this skill and use it again.

Where I wish my guidebook could have gone further is in making connections between academics and part-time employment. The résumé section did a pretty good job making connections with career goals, but most of my connections with academic goals

were more student-driven, relying on the students to supply the connection. While student-driven activities are useful and in many cases preferable, I do wish I could have scaffolded this a bit more, and I think that's an area for future development of this project. If I have the opportunity to do so in the future, I'd love to talk with some of the professors in computer science and the other majors from which we employ students in order to see if there are ways that we could connect their academic curriculum directly with the work at MiTech. In a way, MiTech would then serve as a praxis, giving the students a direct platform in which to try out and hone the skills that they learned in the classroom. When I originally started envisioning the project, I pictured a bit more of this sort of relationship between MiTech and academics, but it proved a bit harder to implement than I expected, especially with the pandemic going on and many of the professors I would have liked to talk to working remotely.

As I continue to develop this guidebook in the future, I'd also like to turn it into more of a curriculum beyond the book itself. I could see myself developing actual lesson plans to accompany the guidebook, with direct teaching on my part to help the students master the tech skills and job skills needed for the job. I think a consistent training program that goes beyond the book into actual hands-on teaching and learning would be beneficial for both MiTech and the student employees, and I'd love to use my teaching background and the work that I've put into this project up to this point to put something like that into action. When I started the capstone process last semester I was a bit skeptical of the idea that my capstone might be the jumping off point for an actual new direction for my career, something that I'd actually implement in my job, but I can absolutely see doing that now and look forward to the chance to play a role in my student

employees' academic success. In that way, I think this has been an important scholarly development for me, in that I'm once again taking on a teaching and mentorship role, once again contributing to the development of the minds of future generations, and am actually looking forward to doing so.

So that brings us back to the original question: *how can employers be more involved with their part-time undergraduate student employees' academic and career goals, to help them make the most of their work-study experience?* My hope is that this guidebook serves as an example for other employers at Miami University and other universities, demonstrating how employers can take a more active, hands-on role in their student employees' development, academics, and future career plans. These students are more than just a resource, more than just a source of cheap labor. It seems to me that employers of college students ought to feel a responsibility to their employees, making sure that their academic and social lives don't suffer unnecessarily because of their employment, or better yet might even be enhanced by it. In the same way that all employers ought to consider and support their employees' work-life balance, employers of college students can do a better job helping their student employees maintain work-study balance. As Chu et al (2019) suggests, employers need to recognize that their student-employees occupy a dual role, and offer flexibility and accommodation to help them meet the expectations as both student and employee. I simply suggest that we can also combine the two roles and align them toward the same goal.

At the start of my guidebook I asked my students to forget about the question "what's expected of me?" and instead focus on the question "what do I want to get out of this job?" Now as I consider the broader implications of my project, I would encourage

employers to undertake a similar reframing: instead of asking what you can get out of your college student employees, ask what they can get out of the experience as well. It may seem obvious to say that a mutually beneficial relationship benefits everyone, but too often employers seem to take a more zero-sum approach, acting as though they need to milk every last ounce of effort and time from their employees in order to succeed as a business. An employer that finds ways to give back to their employees may very well find that they get more from them as well. Particularly in a setting where those employees are also students, perhaps learning how to succeed in a job for the first time, we owe it to them to ensure that their experience is a positive one and help them develop into productive members of the work force.

It takes a village to raise a child. Any employer who hires part-time student employees is part of that metaphorical village, in that they will forever be a part of that student's college learning experience. As employers, it is important that we remember our responsibility to each student's development. College is a fantastic opportunity for young minds to develop and grow, shaping the future of our planet in the process. As employers we can nurture that growth and become a positive and crucial piece of that process.

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