Earning to Learn: How America's Work Colleges Are Bridging Equity Gaps and Connecting Education to Employment

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Key Points

- At a time when the value of a liberal arts education is being questioned more than ever, America's work colleges—liberal arts schools that explicitly prepare students for employment after graduation—offer a compelling response.
- Work colleges also offer pathways for traditionally underserved populations through higher education, which has positive implications for educational equity.
- Paul Quinn College is one of the newest federally designated work colleges and the first to adopt the urban work college model, and it is now seeking ways to expand this model to other urban environments.
- While traditional liberal arts institutions may not wish or be able to adopt the full work college model, several lessons from these schools can help instruct other colleges looking for ways to better align education with work.

On the campuses of many public flagship and elite private colleges and universities across America, lazy rivers, climbing walls, and make-your-own-smoothie stations lure students of the selfie generation. Faculty members and administrators creatively pursue ways to keep students satisfied, while employers increasingly complain that recent graduates lack the soft—and often hard—skills necessary to succeed in the world of work.

But on the campuses of the nation's nine work colleges—small liberal arts institutions from Texas to Missouri, North Carolina, and Vermont—students are attracted by a much different environment. They pay greatly reduced or no tuition to attend these schools in exchange for helping sustain their campuses through a comprehensive work program.

Traditional liberal arts colleges employ a variety of initiatives to connect students to work opportunities—internship programs, co-ops, and work study, to name a few. These initiatives often provide students with some additional income or expose them to a potential career, but they do not necessarily go so far as to fully integrate employment into the academic undergraduate experience.

This is where work colleges differ: They combine a foundational liberal arts education with real work experience (not to mention the typically low cost to students). Work colleges are part of the federal work study (FWS) program overseen by the US Department of Education. At each college, employment is part of each student's course of study. Students work an average of 8–20 hours a week in a variety of jobs and perform community service as part of an aligned curriculum. They earn tuition credits through their work, graduating with significantly less debt than students at traditional institutions or with no debt at all. From 2008 to 2013, 20 percent

fewer work college graduates used student loans than traditional private nonprofit college graduates.[1]

While rigorous third-party evaluations are lacking, work college alumni believe their institutions better prepared them for the workforce than other traditional private or public four-year institutions would have. In the most recent survey, 68 percent of work college graduates reported that their undergraduate experiences prepared them better for work than their peers, compared to 55 percent of private and 47 percent of public college graduates.[2] Work college leaders report that their students are in incredibly high demand by employers even before they complete their education.

Although these nine institutions share a common label, each has a unique identity and mission. While the more conservative and Christian College of the Ozarks in Missouri has recently added a required patriotism course for students,[3] Warren Wilson College outside Asheville, North Carolina, is known for its environmentalism-oriented student population.[4] Campus locations and work placements also range from truly rural and conservation oriented to city based and business focused. Berea College in Kentucky places students in jobs crucial to sustaining the school and physical campus, whereas Paul Quinn College in South Dallas leverages its urban environment to match students with city employers off campus.

What is common across these schools is the sense of work, service, culture, and community that each exudes—an ethos associated with the postgraduation employment successes that often surpass their traditional counterparts.[5]

Work colleges do serve a small slice of the college-going population, and the model is complicated, requiring dedicated staff and careful management—no panacea for institutions seeking a quick and easy funding source. But work college students often come from some of the most traditionally underprivileged, underrepresented, college-going—and college-graduating—groups in America. An examination of this model and the people who lead and succeed in these institutions is instructive for all who follow the education-to-work pipeline and its tangled implications for educational equity in the United States.

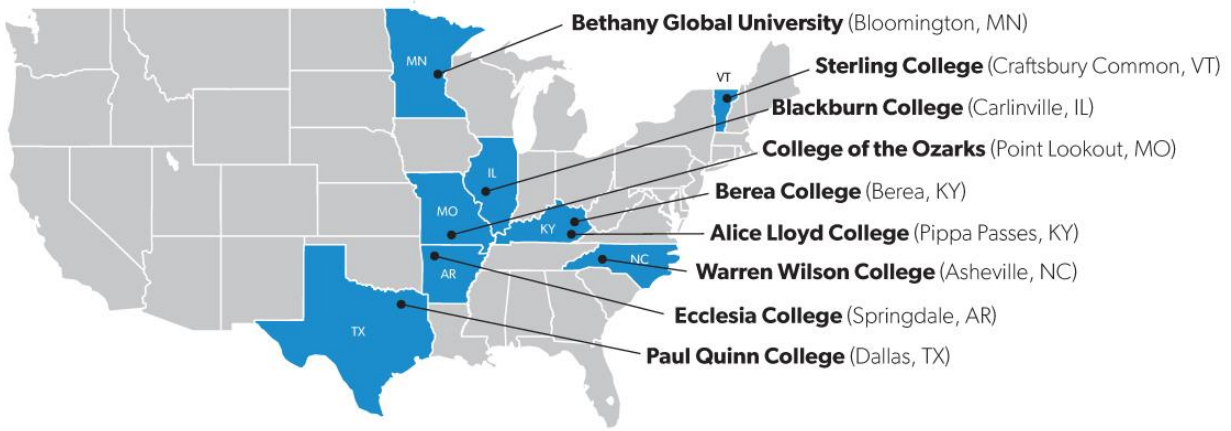
The Work Colleges

The work college concept was founded more than 100 years ago by a few small colleges in rural America. Perhaps the best known of these is Berea College in Kentucky, which has long served as a leading institution of higher education in the region. Like many of the schools that would go on to become work colleges, Berea was founded to provide an education to a local, underserved population that would be unlikely to access higher education otherwise.[6] To serve these students, work was essential; they could

Work College Evolution Timeline[11]

- Early 1970s: Berea College granted initial funding by Educational Foundation of America to refine and share work model
- 1982: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation funded initial convening of institutions (including Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, and Warren Wilson) with existing work programs showing characteristics of the model
- 1987: Ford Foundation funded a study of colleges with a work program; study resulted in conceptualization of the Work Colleges Consortium (WCC)
- 1992: Higher Education Act reauthorization is first federal statute to recognize the work college model; Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, College of the Ozarks, and Warren Wilson designated as first work colleges[12]
- 1993: First federal funding allocated for work colleges through FWS
- 1994: First federal regulations put in place to detail work college requirements[13]
- 1996: WCC formally incorporated, including Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, College of the Ozarks, and Warren Wilson[14]
- 1997: Sterling College designated as work college and joined WCC[15]
- 2005: Ecclesia College designated as work college and joined WCC[16]
- 2016: Bethany Global University gained work college status[17]
- 2017: Paul Quinn College became first historically black college and first urban work college[18]

Figure 1. Work Colleges Across America



Source: Author.

"earn their keep" by performing duties that would keep the campus functioning.

But the founding philosophy behind the work component of the Berea education went beyond practical means. Instead, work was seen as a crucial part of the students' comprehensive education, helping align the whole student population around a shared commitment to the school and its mission.[7] This philosophy continues across the diverse work college campuses of today.

In 1992, the Higher Education Act reauthorization officially included the work college designation, and Berea and four additional schools with similar models were recognized. Now, nine institutions carry the label: Alice Lloyd (Pippa Passes, KY), Berea (Berea, KY), Bethany Global University (Bloomington, MN), Blackburn (Carlinville, IL), College of the Ozarks (Point Lookout, MO), Ecclesia (Springdale, AR), Paul Quinn (Dallas, TX), Sterling (Craftsbury Common, VT), and Warren Wilson (Asheville, NC).

Eight of these schools are members of the Work Colleges Consortium (WCC), a group managed by a lean staff of two who provide support to the schools and structure to the collaborative activities they organize for member colleges.[8] According to WCC Executive Director Robin Taffler, the consortium serves as "a big support group": They share best practices, help schools comply with FWS requirements, promote work learning services on and off campuses, and convene multiple working groups for college leaders.[9]

Paul Quinn College and Bethany Global University are the two newest schools to be designated as work colleges. Paul Quinn is the first historically black college and university and first urban institution to join the list; Bethany Global is a Christian missionary university. Silver Lake College in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, also plans to apply to the US Department of Education for work college status. If approved, it would be the first Catholic institution to join the group and the third newly designated work college in just two years.[10]

How the Model "Works"

What makes the work college model unique is right in the name: As part of the agreement for admittance into one of these schools, students sign up to complete mandatory work assignments that range from 8–20 hours per week. They also attend regular academic classes and are evaluated with both classroom grades and work-based performance assessments.[28] Work assessments differ across the colleges but typically include evaluations of student progress against identified skills and aptitudes resulting, in some cases, in work grades and a labor transcript that accompanies a student's academic one.

The work college model aligns academic, work, and community service activities to provide students with a holistic experience that prepares them for the realities of working life after college. Students perform a variety of jobs that support the campus mission and basic needs, such as maintaining buildings and grounds and supporting food services, as well as professional functions, such as admissions and program administration. Students progress from more entry-level positions into more professional ones as they solidify a course of study and then align

Institutional Characteristics

Alice Lloyd College (Pippa Passes, KY):[19]
- Enrollment: 605
- Retention Rate: 84%
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 31%
- Average Net Price: $14,200
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 100%/$9,541
  - Pell: 53%/$4,271
  - Federal: 62%/$4,646

Berea College (Berea, KY):[20]
- Enrollment: 1,665
- Retention Rate: 84% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 63%
- Average Net Price: $2,862
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 100%/$30,477
  - Pell: 83%/$4,538
  - Federal: 18%/$3,268

Blackburn College (Carlinville, IL):[21]
- Enrollment: 596
- Retention Rate: 65% (Full Time); 100% (Part Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 42%
- Average Net Price: $13,529
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 96%/$12,393
  - Pell: 60%/$4,433
  - Federal: 82%/$5,814

College of the Ozarks (Point Lookout, MO):[22]
- Enrollment: 1,517
- Retention Rate: 74% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 69%
- Average Net Price: $13,308
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 100%/$15,914
  - Pell: 55%/$4,033

Ecclesia College (Springdale, AR):[23]
- Enrollment: 271
- Retention Rate: 56% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 12% (67% Transfer Rate)
- Average Net Price: $21,173
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 100%/$7,120
  - Pell: 61%/$4,033
  - Federal: 30%/$11,341

Paul Quinn College (Dallas, TX):[24]
- Enrollment: 500
- Retention Rate: 63% (Full Time); 100% (Part Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 19%
- Average Net Price: $10,858
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 100%/$3,566
  - Pell: 77%/$2,512
  - Federal: 59%/$3,878

Sterling College (Craftsbury Common, VT):[25]
- Enrollment: 146
- Retention Rate: 50% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 69%
- Average Net Price: $24,777
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 98%/$12,326
  - Pell: 53%/$2,112
  - Federal: 68%/$3,680

Warren Wilson College (Asheville, NC):[26]
- Enrollment: 716
- Retention Rate: 59% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 51%
- Average Net Price: $26,713
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 94%/$23,737
  - Pell: 41%/$4,726
  - Federal: 58%/$6,251

Bethany Global University (Bloomington, MN):[27]
- Enrollment: 271
- Retention Rate: 83% (Full Time)
- Six-Year Graduation Rate: 68% Overall; 27% for Bachelor's Degrees
- Average Net Price: $10,297
- Percentage of Students Receiving Aid/Average Amount of Aid:
  - Grant/Scholarship: 90%/$11,943
  - Pell: 34%/$4,567
  - Federal: 40%/$6,353

their work accordingly. The work component provides the double benefit of subsidizing student costs to attend the institution and maintaining campus functions.[29]

At some traditional liberal arts colleges, work experiences such as internships, FWS, and co-ops have long existed. In many cases, these experiences are intended to complement a student's academic journey while providing the student with a paycheck or exposure to future job options. However, broadly speaking, the work college model has imbued employment into academic experiences in a much more comprehensive way than these other opportunities.

When students enter work colleges as freshmen, they are generally matched with one of the "lower-tier" employment opportunities, such as cafeteria or landscaping services. These jobs are essential for the daily functioning of the campus; the schools would otherwise have to hire external workers to fill the positions. Instead, students learn foundational work skills such as timeliness, communication, and teamwork while contributing to campus life and earning money that goes directly to their tuition costs.

This contrasts with traditional FWS in a few important ways. The clearest financial distinction is that work college student payments go directly to support their tuition, whereas traditional FWS students receive a paycheck. In terms of work placement, work college students are guaranteed employment since it is such an essential element of how they pay to attend; FWS students must seek employment, often much more independently. Available funds, pay scales, and jobs fluctuate across FWS campuses and student placements, whereas work colleges consistently operate their financial model year to year.[30]

Taffler puts it simply: "If our students didn't show up, our colleges wouldn't function."[31] At Paul Quinn College, for example, student labor last year accounted for the equivalent of 15 full-time employees each semester.[32] Education is still the foremost priority for work college students—but work is part of the educational program at these schools, teaching students both the hard and soft skills so in demand by employers today. And since work colleges serve many students from families that might lack a strong history of work experience and success, the level of structure, responsibility, and high expectations this model instills is crucial.

Academic faculty and work supervisors wear a variety of hats, offering mentorship and counseling support to students to complement their more formal roles on campus. Feedback from the work program informs curriculum and pedagogy across traditional academic classes as well; for example, when work supervisors report the need for improvement in writing or other communications skills, this feedback is considered by traditional humanities instructors and practiced in the classroom.[33]

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Policies vary across schools, but generally once students serve the minimum time in the initial position and as they progress through their academics, they are eligible to apply for jobs with greater levels of responsibility and stronger alignment with their course of study. A student who majors in health sciences, for example, can apply to work in the campus laboratory or clinic. A computer science major can work in the computer lab. Math majors can work in the financial aid office or in program administration, gaining exposure to how real-world jobs are connected to what a 20-year-old might think is a more esoteric field of study. This differs from both traditional FWS—in which students seek jobs available, often without alignment to study—and the co-op model, in which students work full time without taking classes. Further, some students intentionally pursue work placements outside their academic major to develop skills in different contexts.

Because students are engaged in this level of work, they are eligible for campus funding allocations, as well as work-study dollars from the federal government. This arrangement was formalized as part of the Higher Education Act reauthorization of 1992. The first federal regulations were put in place to define and set requirements for work college eligibility in 1994.[34]

Federal Definition and Requirements as Stated in FWS Regulations

A work college is defined in statute as a school that:

- "has been a public or private nonprofit, four-year, degree-granting institution with a commitment to community service;
- has operated a comprehensive work-learning-service program for at least two years;
    - a student work/service program that is an integral and stated part of the institution's educational philosophy and program; requires participation of all resident students for enrollment and graduation; includes learning objectives, evaluation, and a record of work performance as part of the student's college record; provides programmatic leadership by college personnel at levels comparable to traditional academic programs; recognizes the educational role of work-learning-service supervisors; and includes consequences for nonperformance or failure in the work-learning-service program similar to the consequences for failure in the regular academic program.
- requires resident students, including at least one-half of all students who are enrolled on a full-time basis, to participate in a comprehensive work-learning-service program for at least five hours each week, or at least 80 hours during each period of enrollment (except summer school), unless the student is engaged in a school-organized or approved study abroad or externship program; and
- provides students participating in the comprehensive work learning-service program with the opportunity to contribute to their education and to the welfare of the community as a whole."[39]

Each year, the US Department of Education allocates a set amount of funding for distribution across the schools through FWS. For 2017–18, that allocation is $8.39 million. When new work colleges are added, as two have been in the past two years, the pool of money must then be spread across more institutions.[35] Federal funds cover less than half the total operating expenditures for these schools, and many supplement federal funding streams with their endowments and private philanthropy.[36] For example, approximately 70 percent of the revenue College of the Ozarks uses to fund students tuition-free comes from donations and endowment earnings.[37] Berea College counts on endowment revenue to cover 75 percent of operating costs, using federal and state funding for 16 percent and donations for the remaining 9 percent.[38]

Wages earned by work college students are tax-exempt due to a provision that considers these wages as scholarships to students. The money students earn directly covers the cost of tuition. Importantly, each work college matches dollar for dollar the funding received from the federal government, which incentivizes careful, deliberate spending. In addition, each work college also receives an allocation of traditional FWS funding, which is matched at least 25 cents on the dollar, as required for all other institutions of higher education.[40]

Outcomes

One of the most compelling pieces of the work college story is how the graduates of these schools are faring in life after college. According to the most recent data from the WCC, work college graduates are more engaged in their community and in service than other graduates. They report that their college experience better prepared them for employment than non-work-college peers in areas such as "developing and using effective leadership skills" and "getting along with people whose attitudes and opinions are different from their own." Considering the high demand for soft skills such as the ability to communicate, problem-solve, and work in teams, these results further highlight the success of this model in meeting today's workforce needs.[41]

Work college graduates are also in a better financial position than their peers from private and public nonprofit institutions. Whereas 64 percent of private and 53 percent of public college graduates used loans to finance their education between 2008 and 2013, only 44 percent of work college students did. Loans for those work college students who borrow (three of the schools fully subsidize all student costs) averaged about $2,000 less than those for traditional public graduates and $3,000 less for traditional private counterparts.[42]

Additionally, work colleges generally serve majority low socioeconomic status populations and many first-generation college students. These groups have historically struggled to graduate from college. While work colleges are achieving greater rates of success with these populations, on average, than many other institutions, graduation rates remain a challenge on some campuses. Schools such as Berea College and College of the Ozarks are having greater success than the national average, with 63 percent and 69 percent six-year graduation rates, respectively. (The national average is 59 percent.[43]) At Paul Quinn College, however, the six-year graduation rate for the most recent cohort was 19 percent. Although on its face this number appears discouraging, it is double the rate from before President Michael Sorrell took over, and it will take many years of building on recent success to increase the overall graduation rate to numbers that compare with those from other institutions.

Berea College

Berea College is located in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, about 45 minutes by car from Lexington. The school's mission is grounded in its "Great Commitments," which have evolved over a century. The institution's "moral framework" is centered on principles of opportunity, kinship, equality, and serving the region.[44]

The school is consistently ranked among top liberal arts institutions and is the most selective in Kentucky, with relatively low acceptance and quite high yield rates.[45] Berea covers each student's tuition cost through scholarships worth close to $100,000 over four years.[46] This financial support is crucial, as Berea serves a student population that is 96 percent Pell grant–eligible, 72 percent from the surrounding region, and 25 percent minority.[47] Further, more than 50 percent of students are the first in their families to go to college.[48]

Students receive almost $50 million annually in grants and scholarships; Berea covers nearly $40 million with the other $10 million coming from state, federal, and other scholarship funds. In 2015, one in three Berea students graduated with no debt. Of those with debt, the average was $7,133 compared to $35,000 nationally.[49] Not surprisingly, the school often tops the lists of rankings for value by publications such as *Washington Monthly*, *USA Today*, *Princeton Review*, and *US News & World Report*.[50]

Berea graduates report high rates of satisfaction with their college experience, especially regarding preparation for the workforce. Ninety percent of students in 2014–15 reported that the work program equipped them with in-demand soft skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving, and that these skills helped them with their academic studies in college.[51]

Labor Program and Operations Manager David Slinker explains how the work and academic programs align at Berea. "The nature of work has a way of nurturing those soft skills so in need," he explains. "We look at benchmarks every year for the qualities employers are looking for and integrate them into our work program. I have yet to find anyone who can name a place on campus where students don't have an opportunity to develop and exercise those skills."[52]

Judith Weckman, director of institutional research and assessment, adds that the campus emphasizes how to serve others above self. "Our service commitment shines through," she says. "When employers come to campus to interview students, they tell us this is the type of person we are looking for."[53]

College of the Ozarks

Situated on 1,000 acres in the Missouri Ozark Mountains, College of the Ozarks' mission is "to provide the advantages of a Christian education for youth of both sexes, especially those found worthy, but who are without sufficient means to procure such training." The mission is pursued through a focus on five key goals: academic, vocational, Christian, patriotic, and cultural.[54] A vice president is assigned to each of these goal areas to ensure a sharp focus.

College of the Ozarks joins Berea as one of three work colleges that charges no tuition to accepted students. The college also covers 100 percent of student expenses through the work program and the significant endowment built and sustained for more than three decades by President Jerry C. Davis. Dubbed "Hard Work U.," the school requires 90 percent of each incoming class to demonstrate financial need for acceptance.[55]

Students at Hard Work U. work more hours on average than at any other work college, with a

40-hour week commitment that must be completed over a holiday or summer break each semester on top of the 15-hour weekly requirement. The very name of their work program—Work Education—implies that college leaders value work as much as academics. Students are formally evaluated for their work performance and earn a work grade each semester, graduating with a separate work transcript that can be shared with potential employers.

Along with completing the function of the job, students, through the Work Education Program, focus on specific soft skills including reliability, teamwork and collaboration, initiative and motivation, responsibility and accountability, quality work, and communication.[56] Opportunities abound to match student academics and interests with close to 100 on-campus work stations. Students completing the hotel or restaurant management major can serve in the campus Keeter Center, a full-service restaurant and hotel facility. Criminal justice majors can work as student officers in the campus security department, serving alongside an employee officer.

Sue Head, vice president for cultural affairs, proudly explains how every building on campus has been built with the assistance of student work. She calls it "rigor with joy." Students feel dignity in work and a well-deserved pride of accomplishment. Further, the work component translates into a deep sense of shared ownership for the physical campus. "When you see your roommate out mowing the campus lawn," Head explains, "you're not going to throw your trash on that grass."[57]

Taffler echoes how refreshing it is to set foot on a campus where students come right up to ask if they can help carry something. "I could drag an elephant across a traditional campus, and no student would look up from his phone," she says. Here, students fundamentally view themselves as part of a community with a shared commitment to service—a community of mutual benefit that exposes students to peers from similar backgrounds and circumstances who support one another through their college experiences.[58]

Head also emphasizes how well this work ethic translates into employment opportunities for graduates. She reports that Career Day is packed with employers who want to hire their students because they know how to work, be on time, and present themselves. She explains, "This is a story of people pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. It isn't a free ride, but students have incredible ownership over the work they do here."[59]

The hard work in Hard Work U. is modeled by faculty and students alike. Faculty on campus regularly teach heavy course loads unheard of at most institutions of higher education. The school has been debt-free for 30 years, and leaders seek to model good financial stewardship to students with the goal that they graduate debt-free.[60]

Paul Quinn College and the Urban Work College Model

Until this year, each of the work colleges has shared in common a rural environment and campus-centered work program. Now the model is evolving to serve one of the nation's neediest populations: the inner city. Located in South Dallas, Texas, Paul Quinn College became the first urban institution to gain work college status in March 2017, under the stewardship of President Michael J. Sorrell.

Sorrell became president of Paul Quinn in 2007, at a time when the school was failing in nearly all ways. The institution originated, as many work colleges, to serve those who otherwise would not access higher education—in this case, freed slaves.[61] It was founded in 1872 in Austin, relocated to Waco in 1877, and finally landed in Dallas in 1990.[62] Throughout that tumultuous tenure, the school suffered challenges including two fires and a tornado, board member corruption charges, and significant enrollment fluctuations, ranging from over 1,000 students at peak times to under 200 as recently as 2009.[63]

The tide seems to have finally turned in Paul Quinn's favor under Sorrell's leadership. He took over when enrollment was down, the financial situation was particularly dire, and the physical campus was ailing. In under a decade, he has righted the ship with a strong leadership style and ability to draw local and national attention and funding for his vision to serve his student population.

In 2016, enrollment was up to 500 students[64]—74 percent black, 22 percent Hispanic, and 100 percent receiving some type of grant or scholarship. The school posted a 57 percent retention rate for full-time students and 100 percent for part-timers. Net price was down from almost $25,000 to under $15,000 thanks to the work college model,[65] and now the school's

stated goal is for students to graduate with no more than $10,000 of student debt.[66] Not surprisingly, the college now holds a waiting list for those seeking admittance.

The campus ethos is "WE over Me," and its mission is "to provide a quality, faith-based education that addresses the academic, social, and Christian development of students."[67] Whereas the other work colleges focus on work placements in and around the physical campus, Paul Quinn's placements begin on campus and soon take students out into businesses across Dallas, strengthening relationships with students, the school, and the city.[68] This is a new approach that leaders at Paul Quinn are refining in the hopes of scaling it across other cities.

Work colleges are not just helping link students with *opportunities* to work—they are teaching students *how* to work and holding them accountable for their progress along the way.

Like College of the Ozarks and many of other work colleges, students at Paul Quinn enter freshman year, complete a general matching process, and are placed in jobs fulfilling essential campus functions. After demonstrating strong work performance and readiness, students are eligible to apply for the Corporate Work Program with placements in various businesses and organizations across Dallas that are brokered through personal relationships and outreach from college administrators.

The college largely serves as the employer of record, matching students with the proper aptitude for a given position and supporting them with resume development and mock interviews. As the program matures, more outside employers are partnering with the college and expanding the scope of options. For example, humanities majors studying history or political science—fields some point to as less obviously connected to future jobs—are finding work placements in schools, nonprofit organizations, and local government agencies.[69]

Paul Quinn College students also receive A–F letter grades capturing their success across 10 soft skills clearly articulated as part of the work program and informed by work supervisors on and off campus: attendance/punctuality; accountability; initiative/willingness to learn; teamwork/attitude; prideful workmanship/presentation; response to supervision; workplace culture, policy, and safety; communication; problem-solving; and critical thinking.[70] Work colleges are not just helping link students with *opportunities* to work—they are teaching students *how* to work and holding them accountable for their progress along the way. And when students struggle to achieve one of these soft skills or employers report the need for student workers to improve in one, college leaders work together with the faculty to ensure academic classes incorporate these skills, so students can practice them across the board.[71]

Like with the work colleges that have been in existence for decades longer, employers of Paul Quinn students are already seeing the benefits of such a robust support and development system. The goal is for Corporate Work Program organizations to hire their student workers after graduation, benefiting both the graduate and the employer, who is then saved from typical onboarding challenges and delays.[72]

Recently, a particularly promising Paul Quinn student was given the opportunity to participate in the Corporate Work Program during the second semester of his freshman year. A math major working in the college business office, he was performing so well that he earned a placement at a Dallas company that manages environmental issues. He has now been hired year-round, thus earning additional money besides his work college tuition allotment and gaining exposure to doing math in a business setting. His work supervisor hopes to retain him as a full-time employee following graduation.[73]

Paul Quinn is quite upfront about its goal to serve. The admissions page proudly boasts:

> The goal is greatness. Greatness for you and for those you will lead. . . . This journey will not be easy. It's not supposed to be. However, for those people who feel called to change the lives of others, there is no better place for you to be.[74]

Compare this to the admissions pages of leading elite universities, where the clear emphasis is on

personal growth and exploration and what the school can do for each individual student.

Sorrell's vision is that the work college model can flourish in the urban environment because of this attention to service over self. Unwavering in his desire to combat poverty, he sees the need for city schools to "turn themselves outward and address the needs of the communities they serve." He also seeks to flip the historical "Superman complex" in which some external entity seeks to swoop in and save an urban population. Instead, he holds that urban students and communities have the capacity to save themselves and that his urban work college model is one crucial piece of that redemption.[75]

Sorrell wrote his 2015 higher education management doctoral dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania on the work college model and its replicability for an urban environment.[76] He is now living out his own recommendations at Paul Quinn, and he aspires to further develop the urban work college model and grow a new network of schools employing this design in city settings. He sees this as a fitting strategy for addressing a host of problems that plague urban areas: significant poverty and unemployment rates, as well as skills gaps that prohibit city residents from qualifying for the available jobs.

Sorrell sees the potential of scaling the urban work college model as just common sense following all his research to understand why the work college concept had not caught on in more places. "People couldn't figure out how to make work less like hard labor," he explains. "We don't have that problem because we're located in one of the largest cities in the country, with access to tons of jobs." This understanding led him to modify the work program to incorporate city employment opportunities and tie the college's success to the city's infrastructure, extending its footprint. "We looked across the landscape and saw no version of higher education that gave us an opportunity to thrive," he says. "So we made up our own."[77]

Lessons and Recommendations

Taffler reports an uptick in outreach in recent years from other institutions trying to learn about the work college model as the debate about the return on investment for higher education has intensified.

However, the model is not a quick fix for floundering schools seeking a financial boost. To comply with federal regulations and function successfully as a work college, the right leadership and conditions must be in place. Sorrell's research outlines essential elements for a school to successfully take on the work college model:[78]

- **Appropriate History and Mission.** Schools must be oriented toward service and able to instill a culture that fosters aligning work, academics, and community involvement.
- **Adequate Resources.** Although the federal government contributes funding to these schools, this money supports only a portion of campus and student needs, and it comes with significant federal reporting requirements. The model is actually expensive to operate, and the existing work colleges do significant additional fundraising and operate lean budgets and staffs to function efficiently.
- **Dedicated Students and Staff Committed to the Work Program.** At a work college, the employment program is as much a part of the culture as academic classes. Students balance a full academic course load with their year-round work placements. The WCC provides grants to work college faculty and staff members for projects that integrate classroom and work-based learning. This provides a boost to these individuals who wear a variety of hats in serving the students and campuses.
- **Willingness to Confront Graduation Rates.** Institutions of higher education are incentivized to increase graduate rates. Work colleges in many cases serve populations that have historically struggled with graduating from college. While work colleges are often achieving greater success in this area than many other institutions, graduation rates remain a challenge on some campuses, such as Paul Quinn.
- **Operational Capacity.** Complying with federal regulations and reporting requirements for eligibility as a work college requires dedicated staff; the WCC exists largely to help the schools with these duties. Institutions interested in the model must understand this commitment upfront.

- **Ability to Serve as an "Anchor" Institution.** Sorrell's vision is that work colleges serve as an anchor in a geographic area, closely linking students' work experiences with the surrounding campus and community in a mutually beneficial relationship. Institutions interested in a strong work program must consider the role they are willing and able to play in the larger community.

While not all, or even many, institutions are well poised to adopt the full work college model, several takeaways apply broadly across the higher education landscape. Work college leaders are clear in their understanding of what makes these schools successful, offering advice that can help others seeking ways to better link students to jobs and schools to economic development.

Focus on a Clear Mission. Work colleges do not try to be all things to all people. The institution's core purpose should be clear, and students and faculty alike should be aligned with the institutional mission.

Ensure Work Is Meaningful. Work colleges help students evolve in their work placements as they progress academically, so the work aligns as closely as possible to their area of study. Early work placements can also help students find a new academic interest they might not otherwise have pursued. Institutions with internship, co-op, or other work components should be intentional about how work informs students' academic and personal growth.

Align the Liberal Arts Education with Skills for Employment. Work colleges specifically list soft skills and grade students against their progress in attaining these skills in their jobs. At other institutions with work opportunities for students, leaders can use this same approach and develop a soft skills curriculum that can be emphasized in traditional liberal arts classes. For example, students need exposure to and experience with time management. Work colleges emphasize the importance of showing up on time and following through with commitments. Other types of institutions can do the same through expectations for academic classes and other campus activities. Institutions should consider dedicating at least one staff or faculty member to aligning education with employment skills and opportunities for students.

Layer Student Supports. While it may be easier for vulnerable students to fall through the cracks on a traditional campus—missing or dropping classes, enrolling in courses misaligned to a given major, and so forth—on a work college campus, faculty and staff notice when students are off track. Students are assigned work coaches or supervisors in addition to their academic professors, providing multiple touchpoints with adults in and outside the classroom. Given that so many students attending these schools are low-income or first-generation, this level of support is crucial for increasing retention and student success and a strong model for other schools to pursue.

Be Outcomes Oriented. A work program is about much more than the exercise of doing the work itself. Leaders must think through what they want students to gain throughout the work experience. How will it improve soft skills and student employment after graduation? How will the program serve the community and establish relationships between the institution and the surrounding area? Work placements must be closely monitored and carefully evaluated to ensure quality and relevance.

Examine Financial Priorities and Have Transparent Conversations Around Them. Work colleges generally serve students who pay reduced or no tuition on their own. This is a contrast to institutions that depend on enrollment dollars, which necessarily influences the number and types of students they admit. Institutions that accept students from a range of financial means must carefully consider the types of supports necessary to ensure those students can be successful upon matriculation.

Make Federal Work Study More Intentional. Work colleges match federal work college allocations dollar for dollar, whereas traditional FWS must be matched at 25 cents on the dollar. With more financial "skin in the game," the work colleges have an extra incentive to use the money wisely. Studying ways to improve FWS expenditures and returns on investment can help ensure limited federal funds are dedicated to the students and schools best positioned to use them effectively.

Conclusion

No matter the physical location, environment, or ideology, each work college embraces a service-oriented ethos that instills an understanding of the value of work and the importance of contributing to a community bigger than oneself. In contrast to other institutions pursuing appeals to individual students, their parents, and their financial contributions, work colleges attract and serve a population that, for a variety of reasons, is less focused on what is in it for them exclusively.

Certainly, not every student pursuing postsecondary education has the financial need and the focus on swift employability that seem to draw some to today's work colleges. But as the profile of the new "typical" undergraduate continues to evolve and as our country continues to promote opportunities for traditionally underserved students to attain credentials, explicitly connecting academic studies to the world of work may be the wave of the future. And as traditional higher education institutions seek ways to better demonstrate return on investment, the lessons of the work college model may prove valuable to a broad swath of postsecondary leaders.

About the Author

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