



PUTTING VOCATION AT THE CENTER OF THE CURRICULUM:

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN CUNY'S ETHNOGRAPHIES
OF WORK COURSE

*"I learned that our careers are . . .
created and built . . ."*

-CUNY student

PREPARED BY

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GUTTMAN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Founded in the CUNY tradition of access to excellence, Stella and Charles Guttman Community College offers an innovative model with an emphasis on experiential education, the adoption of learning communities and instructional teams, and a strong value on being simultaneously “high tech” and “high touch.” The College provides a supportive and inclusive environment that nurtures student success with the goal to increase the graduation rate for students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college.

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INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities increasingly recognize the importance of providing students with career information, a strong understanding of work and the labor market, and the skills necessary to succeed in an ever-evolving workplace environment.¹ Yet, even for colleges with the necessary resources and commitments to address careers, learning about the working world remains on the margins of the curriculum—in workshops on resume building, interviewing, or the job search, and perhaps a visit to the career center late in a student’s college tenure. Students who enter higher education with little exposure to the ways and means of preparing for professional careers often graduate with little knowledge of the labor market, job searching, career pathways, or how their majors do (or do not) align with labor market needs. They lack a concrete understanding of the day-to-day life in many careers they have interest in, and how to build up and use networks of family, friends, professors, and colleagues to connect with opportunity and be seen as an asset.

This lack of attention to career preparation only serves to intensify the class and racial divide. The most privileged students, mostly white, are able to anticipate and prepare for professional careers like those of their parents. Meanwhile, students from low-income families continue to think of work mainly as a way to survive and are often left disappointed when, even with a degree completed, few new doors open to them.

The central retention strategy that colleges deploy most frequently is to require students to take an academic success class. Such courses orient students to college life and include self-management skills—how to use time effectively, how to find and use academic support services, how to ask for help.² And, not surprisingly, research shows that, while such courses have a short-term positive impact, that impact fades over time.² Such courses do not deal centrally with careers, although they may recommend that students take part in short-term workshops that teach a set of skills and competencies often called soft skills—how to write a resume; how to dress; how to write an application; how to present oneself both in an interview and in a work setting; how to collaborate on a team.

Many job training programs teach a similar set of skills, which have the benefit of alerting students to expectations employers are likely to have. Although the topics are useful, such training does not ensure that students internalize the skills or can deploy them in demanding work settings. Nor does it help students to critically approach their own career pathways, either by opening up career options to them or providing the space to explore possible careers. And finally, it does not provide an intellectual context for the role of work in human lives, how labor markets operate, why social networks are important, and how race, class, and gender impact experience in the workplace.

GUTTMAN'S SOLUTION



Guttman Community College (City University of New York) has developed a career-preparation alternative in Ethnographies of Work (EOW).³ This required first-year course provides the opportunity to dynamically improve student engagement in career-focused learning and offer traditionally underserved students—low income, first generation, and students of color—the opportunity to gain a sense of agency as they explore their work futures. The EOW model integrates individualized reflection on the character of work into the academic curriculum, rather than keeping work-centered learning a separate endeavor.

Since EOW is a social science course, students interact with workplaces in distinctive, theoretically informed ways. Rather than entering workplaces as interns, they enter as researchers, able to spend significant time uncovering the dynamics that will help inform their career decisions and future work experiences. For example, students will read an academic ethnographic text about a particular workplace dynamic; topics include hierarchical leadership structures, racialized norms in the workplace, and cultural matching in hiring practices. They then visit selected workplaces to replicate the ethnographic study. In doing so, they use theory

and observational methods to gain critical cultural knowledge while learning firsthand about specific workplaces they may one day enter.

EOW is a two-part, yearlong college course and set of experiences that gives students tools to understand and address the challenges and opportunities they will face in the labor market; it does so in both a theoretical and applied context by putting the subject of “work” at the center of learning. At best, the course helps students identify a “vocation,” meaning an occupation to which a person is particularly drawn.

While taking EOW, students complete a paired co-requisite, advisement-centered course, Learning About Being a Successful Student. LaBSS explores academic majors and develops some of the soft skills necessary to successfully enter the workplace setting during students’ EOW projects, as well as skills needed for future internships or other work-based learning experiences. To return to our earlier point, EOW links the intellectual, liberal arts learning about work with the more skills-oriented lab, rather than presenting them as two decontextualized and separate endeavors.

In EOW I, students master ethnographic methods: research design, observation, workplace mapping, and interviewing. The signature course assignment is a semester-long ethnographic investigation of a career or workplace that the student has an interest in pursuing. In EOW II, having mastered the research methodology and gained comfort as researchers in workplaces, students focus on applying ethnographic methods to address a workplace problem. This approach provides students the opportunity to build ethnographic skills, like interviewing and observation, which are necessary for success in both education and workplaces.

Students who understand the meaning of work in human lives and who have a critical understanding of work experience will have greater agency in entering the labor market than those who believe they only need a credential. EOW students are asked to reflect on their own workplace and community experiences with a social science lens, gaining new insights into their work lives.

Most students in Guttman’s majority “minority” student body have experience with discrimination based on class, race, or ethnicity. A powerful aspect of the EOW course is to put these painful anecdotes in the context of institutional and structural racism. Their yearlong exploration directly engages students with working professionals as informants and equips them with deep knowledge about employer expectations and behaviors. They can become better jobseekers, able to cast an informed and critical eye on potential workplaces as they make sense of their career options. EOW also introduces students to the reality that social networks and connections—forms of social capital—matter when entering the labor market, and helps students see and understand their own networks and work intentionally to engage new ones. Armed with that knowledge, students who understand how networks operate will enter the job

market more successfully, and with their eyes open wide about what they may experience as people of color, and how they might engage authentically when equity is in question.

As high school and college educators have learned about EOW, they have reached out to Guttman faculty to learn more. JFF, a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems, has also publicized EOW across its national Pathways to Prosperity Network. On account of the growing interest, Guttman Community College, JFF, and Here to Here, a Bronx-based nonprofit also interested in adapting and disseminating EOW, co-sponsored a small convening in June 2018 to provide detailed information about EOW. The 70 participants had time to discuss their thinking about adapting EOW to their own settings. Simultaneously, Mary Gatta, who leads EOW at Guttman, and Nancy Hoffman from JFF committed to further documentation of the impact of EOW adding to an early Change article, and a chapter on EOW in a forthcoming Routledge book, [Essays on Employer Engagement in Education](#).

THE EOW EXPERIENCE

This report will share the lived experiences of students and employers in Guttman's EOW courses. Over the course of several months, we conducted a series of focus groups with first-year and continuing students, alumni, and employers to explore the ways careers and work are experienced in the course; the ways the course may impact students' ideas about work and their futures; and the ways employers, who host Guttman students' ethnographic research, understand the class and their role in the Guttman experience.⁴

Our sample is a fair composite that is similar to the overall Guttman student body (*see Table 1*). Guttman students come from all boroughs of New York, with the majority from the Bronx. They typically arrive immediately from high school; 79 percent are 19 or younger. The student body is about 59 percent Hispanic, 27 percent black or African American, and 8 percent white, with a small number of Pacific Islanders. There is substantial language diversity. The slight majority are female.

Despite Guttman's diverse student body, in several workplaces that students choose to visit, the staff is predominately if not entirely white. Yet only a small number of students interviewed directly mentioned race or gender when asked what they learned and observed in their workplace visits. We also note that a number of students visited social service agencies where the workforce is more diverse, so they were exposed to professionals of color; no student commented on this either. However, in many cases, the students did reflect on their socioeconomic class positionality and their growing understanding of its impact on their families and themselves.

Table 1—Student Focus Group Participant Demographics (N=25)

Sex	
Male	5
Female	20
Race/Ethnicity	
White	3
Black	7
Hispanic	10
Asian	4
Other	1
Guttman Community College Status	
First-Year Student	13
Continuing Student	9
Alumni	3

Our questions were quite open ended; we did not ask directly about racial and gender dynamics observed. But silence is often as important as speech, so we noticed the lack of comments about race and gender, in relation to class dynamics. We would also note that the interviewers were two white professors and a Latina researcher. We would venture, by way of explanation, that students simply took whiteness as the status quo in many professional worksites and factored that into the behavior and cultures they were observing. Several of the readings (particularly in EOW II) highlight the macro-level structural and micro-aggressions women and people of color experience in the workplace. They had certainly been introduced to what we might call “an equity lens,” not only in EOW but in many other classes at Guttman, and certainly as a major theme in the college ecosystem.

FINDINGS

Overall, students responded positively to their EOW experiences. Through focus group conversations they identified aspects of the class that worked well, challenges they experienced, and how the class impacted their ideas and plans regarding work and careers.

DEVELOPING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LENS TO APPROACH WORK

One of the unique features and learning outcomes of EOW is that students approach their sociological investigations of work with an ethnographic research method framework. As such, students enter workplaces as researchers—using observation, mapping, and interviews to explore work and workplace structures. This approach is distinct from a more traditional sociology or anthropology of work course, as the curriculum is intentionally designed for students to learn about work through firsthand research and observation.

Yet while the ethnographic approach to work is a unique aspect of the course, it can also be a challenge to both teach and learn. In EOW, students are required to master ethnographic methods and then use those methods to explore work and careers. Most first-year college students have never been asked to apply research skills in the field, and so faculty need to provide not only access to the methods, but support and encouragement in setting up observations and carrying out the assignment. We address challenges of teaching EOW later in this report.

LOOKING THROUGH A RESEARCH LENS

Conversations with students illustrate that, through the class, these young women and men began to see how the lens of the ethnographic method can help them better understand work. Students reported that they began to identify themselves as researchers and ethnographers, and used that lens to approach workplaces. As one student explained:

What I liked best was when they took us, when they let us go to the workplace. And I was able to study it because it was honestly like the first time I was going to go study somewhere. I felt it was kinda cool.

Other students found that employing the ethnographic research model helped build their own confidence both inside and outside the classroom.

What I really like about [EOW] is to do the interviews and I feel like that makes people feel open and take people out they shell, because I feel like it took me out my shell, my little turtle shell, and let me speak out and not be scared. I will talk to anybody; “Hello, my name is Jenna.” I am very outspoken now.

And as the quotes below illustrate, once students mastered the methods, they were able to employ them in workplaces to understand work structures, hierarchies, and relationships. As these students make clear—they understand how ethnographic frameworks provide them with the tools and techniques to observe work and workplace dynamics in action. In short, they have learned a new way to see.

[I learned] The way ethnographies work . . . what I learned was it's more about observation and how people interact in the workplace. So that's mostly what I learned about the way people interact, in the way that you see them interact teaches you a lot about the position that they are working in. And I do that a lot more often because I see how people see you in your everyday life.

We did so many participant observations and it's really like getting to the ground level of what your work life is about and what it is that you're doing. Either the monotony of the job or the relationships . . . with other people and how that kind of affects mental physicality and so forth. And honestly since then, I kind of see ethnographies everywhere.

In addition, as exemplified by the quote below, several students noted how using an ethnographic method helped them better understand the ways work structures are both shaped by workers and impact workers' lives.

Yeah, well the workers, their body language is sometimes—they be tired but you can see them fight through it. Before, I not used to pay attention to like whoever is making my food or whatever it is, but it's really important because you don't want somebody that's drowsy or upset making your food or something. So, you know, I like watching people, like [how their] behavior [. . .] changes, all of this, because of their environment.

FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

One of the goals and learning outcomes of EOW is for students to use ethnographic methods to investigate a career they have interest in (EOW I), and to address a workplace problem or research question using ethnography (EOW II). The use of ethnography to directly and indirectly inform students' career opportunities makes EOW unique among academic classes. One of the central challenges is that faculty must ensure that the students' career exploration occurs within the academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology.

This challenge differentiates the course from a more straightforward career exploration activity. It is not just exposure to careers and career pathways that is critical to a successful course and to student learning, but also putting work in a theoretical and evidence-based context. Through our focus groups, we learned that the impact this framing has on students includes not only a more informed and wide range of career options, but also a deeper understanding of how

workplace and societal structures provide both opportunities and constraints on individuals' work and career lives.



Guttman students at the National Minority Supplier Development Council in New York City

CAREER FIELDWORK

Several themes emerged in our focus groups related to students' career ideas. First, EOW provided students with opportunities to explore careers and workplaces that they may not have had access to in the past.

Visiting the workplace exploration seems really cool to me. I had a friend in class who got to go to the office of a major technology company here in [New York City], he showed me pictures and it looked really cool. But, at the same time it was interesting to

see this whole different world. I just feel so foreign right now, because we are in school, we are not in the corporate world. And, to explore how that relates to our life.

Second, students began to see how specific workplace practices and experiences may be different from what they previously thought. This helped to dispel myths they had about careers, many of which were developed from television and movies, rather than any direct knowledge of people who work in the fields of interest; witness the student quoted below, who didn't know that small law firms existed.

When I thought [about] just observing people in the workplace, I thought it would be pretty boring, because [I was observing] someone doing their office job. But for my final project, my first year, I had to go to a law firm and see how that workplace was like and I thought it was cool because it exposed me to like, what an actual courtroom looked like, and how things function. It just taught me a lot, like [about] a law firm in general. I didn't know people could just own their own law firm and just only have two people within the law firm. I thought it was like on TV, where it's a big building with several divisions.

As students explored careers through in-depth ethnographic methods, another theme that emerged relatively frequently was that once students conducted their research in the workplaces, they began to wonder if that career was a fit for them.

But I remember going to a site, it was a public school, at that time I wanted to be a principal. I remember going into that setting and actually observing a principal's office and observing what the principal does and writing a report about that and my reflections on that. So, that assignment stood out to me because it helped me figure out kind of what direction I wanted to go in, and I realized that maybe being a principal isn't really what I want to do. So, that help me in terms of navigating like, do I want a more hands-on approach; do I want to be interacting with students more, rather than being in an office and kind of overseeing things or controlling things or whatever? It helped me in that aspect and I can still reflect on that to this day.

And by delving deep into an occupation, they were also able to gain a sense of the education and career pathway for that profession, thereby informing their own career development. The quote below, however, raises concerns for the student: for instance, has the student lowered her aspirations because she doesn't see a way to stay on her original career path? Such reflections from students provide an opportunity for faculty and advisors in both EOW and LaBSS to help students not only understand the demands of a job, but also determine how those demands align with their life experiences.

The class helped me be realistic and we looked at income, we looked at the amount of years that it was going to be to actually accomplish that goal. So, we broke it down and

I was able to be realistic of myself. Ok, I don't want to be, you know, doing this many years of work before I actually delve into this. So, it helped me navigate through that process.

STRUCTURES OF WORK

While ethnography is a key focus of the course, so is the sociological and anthropological analysis of work. In EOW I and II, through ethnographic investigation and study of research literature, students learn about the structures of work, nuances of workplaces, implicit and explicit culture and norms, power relations, and inequality dynamics. One interesting finding was that students took this perspective beyond classroom assignments into their everyday worlds; they applied the lens and the sociological concepts to the different workplaces they interacted with in their daily lives.

For instance, students enter many of the service sector establishments around New York City to order their food and drinks. As a result of EOW, while in these service establishments they now pay new attention to the work structures around them.

So, usually, if I go to Starbucks or McDonald's, I just order something and leave. But sometimes when I go to these businesses, I'm not looking at just myself in the business, but looking at it as workers and how they integrate with each other and how it's structured.

Another student noted:

Sometimes the energy of the workplace or the language that workers use with each other or just the way they, like their body language, the way they look at each other—to see if it's more teamwork or more like do this or do that.

Students also saw structures of inequality—such as gender, race, and class—in a new light. In those ways, they were able to better understand their interview data within the larger sociological context.

When it came into the second part of EOW, I was also learning how to interview with people. So, I had to interview people . . . and looked at people [in terms of] gender. I look at an organization, [and asked] how do you feel like, being a woman working [here]. She was just explaining how, like, she had a man who was here for a year before her, and he got promoted and stuff like that.

Students also began to identify how certain people in an organization can open doors—in the example below the student calls such people “gatekeepers” and recognizes that they can influence access to jobs. Although the student doesn’t use the term “social capital,” she has

recognized the value of building relationships beyond her usual circle with those who have positional authority and power.

I felt it the most when I'd go to the workplace because you get to know all the gatekeepers. Like boom, I got attached with the vice president, so now I'm in Albany doing this and doing that. So, I thought, you know, I think about that every time, you know, whether at work and just in life in general.

One student explained his understanding of social capital, and how his college experiences fit into that understanding:

I had two internships in high school—one in a defense attorney's office and [one in a district attorney's] office. I worked with data. I sat in on cases. I got to assist in hand picking a jury—it was really cool. I have recommendation letters so, when I'm ready to go to law school, I can use them.

That same student did comment directly on race issues in the workplace. He observed that:

There are not enough black lawyers in the [district attorney's] office. It's a prestigious place to work. You have to have certain grades and connections to work there. If you don't get connections, you don't get the job. You have to start from [the] bottom and work your way up. My supervisor's last name sounded black, so she had to work as paralegal for two years to work up. She said it would be different if she had a white last name.

One interesting common theme is that students began to see the complexity of career choice in relation to identity, social status, racial or ethnic identity, and family values. In many ways, students began to see their careers differently than before the class. The below quote is from an alumna, now in graduate school, who has gained distance and insight from EOW and her subsequent experiences.

One of the things that I learned was that our careers are kind of created and built. It's not just something that you just, you get your degree, you learn a set of skills, and you just get a job and you apply it—it's not given to you that way. So, I learned more of like career dynamics and how we're always learning and navigating through different stages. It's not as clear cut as, you know, learning how to do one thing, and then there's a clear definition and task description for a specific thing that you'll do.

Another student struggled with the degree to which a person's value should be related to the status of their job; she has begun to puzzle it out as a result of class discussion and readings.

I believe the way I look at work has changed. I grew up being taught that my value would be based on my job. That, in society, I won't have a say to make decisions and that I won't be respected if I have a low-skill job. And I learned two things, in part what I was taught is partly true, that is a reality in this society that I work, but also that it doesn't have to be that way. That I don't have to see my value or my identity in my choice of career. So, I try to see my work as important like anyone else's is important, and it's a component or something that needs to be fulfilled and I am that piece of that larger system. So, that's something that I see now. But it's also created some, like, agency in me needing to do well in school because I'm realizing that if I'm going to impact people and policies in places, that it's going to have to be based on whatever number or title is on that degree.

An additional way that student perspectives may have shifted during the EOW experience is that they acknowledge agency over their careers. Students become metacognitive about the choices before them, to the extent of understanding that a first career may not be their last career, and that they can give themselves permission to choose a pathway that may be at odds with their family's expectations.

I'm afraid of investing myself into something knowing that my likes always change and what that will mean for me in the future; when maybe I'm older and don't have, like, the help to learn something new or start new careers. What does that mean when you're changing at a different pace than [where] life is taking you?

I think there's this class, EOW, definitely made me want to pursue what I like a little bit more, whereas my mom does not agree with that necessarily. She wants me to have a safe job or something that's going to make me money because that's what she does. I think the class has helped me open my mind a little more.

CHANGING REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY, WORK, AND PLACE

One of the challenges of the course is that the curriculum covers many negative concepts related to work—alienation; racial, gender, and wage exploitation; emotional labor; prejudice against those living in poverty; and the like. These are often evidenced in the lives of our students and their families. When students can identify these negative concepts in what they observe, they can better understand the attitudes and feelings of those around them, especially their family members. In many cases, students process their parents' work lives through a lens of social class discrimination. Several stated that they are now more sympathetic to family members whose behavior at home is impacted by their rough experiences at work.

Before, I didn't really used to think about how much [a] job affects us. Like, physically and emotionally. I used to think, oh, since you don't have a lot of experience, you don't

really know the effects the job has. But, in the classroom one day . . . the professor mentioned something: “Do you see your parent, or any family member, constantly moody. . . you would think they were just being moody but most of the time it’s just because of their job. And they don’t really like their job.” So, sometimes those are days that affect them, just because they have to deal with that job. That was something that I didn’t really think about. Like for me, my mother used to be so moody. I was like, uh, she’s just being moody! But, when the professor said that, oh, it’s true. Jobs could really affect us.

[My mom] doesn’t like her job. She worked there since I was little. I used to sit way in the back of McDonald’s and wait for her to eat with my brother. It was hard, we had to stay for a long time. And now she’s a manager, that’s how long she’s been there . . . She just wants me to go to school. But just looking at her, like [not coming] home until 11, 12 o’clock in the morning, sometimes. You know what’s hard? I don’t think she likes anything. It’s just the way she is. She don’t have time for herself or anyone.

Another student was able to see her mother’s education and career path in a new light—both in terms of being a first-generation college student and the demands of her career.

So, my mom always wanted to be a teacher. Growing up, her family always told her to get a job that could kind of save us. So, my mom is the first one to go to college, she was the first one to ever get her degree and everybody looked at her in such a big way. And, they said, you’re going to get this big corporate job this way. And she ends up kind of falling in love with pre-med. So, she left teaching and went to pre-med and then she went to work in insurance, where she [handles] regulatory affairs and she works with lawyers. She’s making sure that these cases are being solved, but she will come home and she’ll take her iPad and watch novellas. I like never understood why she was always watching them. And then she took me to work one day and I saw everything she was doing. I was like, never again will I interrupt my mom with her novellas because she needs to like, de-stress, and I understood why she was with this and stuff like that.

In a similar vein, this student was able to contrast the way her mother and father approach their jobs, in addition to understanding how employment benefits can help better ensure economic security throughout one’s lifetime.

My dad is a cab driver and my mom is a home health aide. She doesn’t like her job. I always grew up hearing, get a career so you don’t have to clean people’s butts for a living. But I think my dad has become complacent with his job. He’s not unhappy but he’s not happy. But I think it’s only because he doesn’t have a boss or someone over him all of the time. But, as far as earning the amount of money that he earns, being able to

have sick days or a certain amount of security that other kinds of jobs give you, that's something that he's missing in his life now that he's getting older.

Interestingly, most students did not seem discouraged by the negative work experiences they read about and can now observe and name. Although they rarely say so directly, they seem motivated to choose careers carefully so as to avoid replicating their parents' dissatisfactions.

LABSS AND PROFESSIONALISM

As noted earlier, 20 percent of students' participation in EOW is through the LaBSS course. In this course, students learn the skills-based aspects of work in the context of their readings and discussions. Our focus groups noted that prior to LaBSS, students tended not to have opportunities to gain those skills.

I've been on a lot of interviews and I've had to learn how to communicate by myself. No one taught me how to, besides my mom; she would always tell me to do good on the interview. But no one actually taught me how to prepare myself for an interview.

And, after they completed LaBSS, students reported that they have a clearer understanding of those skills.

In LaBSS, it helps build your resume, helps [you] understand what you should do, how you should dress, professional pictures. That's what we are doing right now. We are building our e-portfolio to become professional.

Several students found in LaBSS an opportunity to create the career resources that will set them apart from other job candidates.

It might put you a step ahead [of] the other candidates that are applying for that same job. So some things that we have done in our classes have helped us [get] a step ahead of other individuals around. But some students are not sure or they're not aware [of how] to put those things on their resume.

Others highlighted that LaBSS provided opportunities to better understand the role of networks and communication skills in their careers.

[For] my LaBSS portion of my EOW, what stood out the most was like personal statements and also how you represent yourself with your network is your net worth. But, like, what you just explained kind of gives you, like, practical things that you can actually apply. So, that makes so much sense, how would someone know you have something unless you put it on paper. I wish little things like that would have come in handier for me.

We also learned that, besides the elevator pitch, the skills we mostly had to build up was communication skills. In order to have communication skills, you know you're willing to speak out more about yourself and who you are.

CONNECTING EOW AND LABSS

Guttman aligns EOW and LaBSS throughout the first year—students attend four and half hours of course time total; three hours are devoted to EOW, taught by a faculty member, and an hour and a half to LaBSS, facilitated by an advisor. The goal is for these two activities to be experienced as one class. While we have made progress toward this goal, the focus groups highlighted that some students still experienced these activities as separate, with LaBSS being perceived as somewhat less important. The following two quotes highlight some of this tension.

Now that I'm thinking about the goals of the course not hitting home, I think it did. It just happened later on for me, like way after the fact, like how a lot of learning happens. But, the way it does connect in a sense . . . but the fact that a lot of students don't see that, don't see the connection, [that's] the kind of problem. They feel LaBSS right now, it's not as important but it kind of is; it is important because it contributes to overall grade. They don't take that consideration, which is like having those, they feel like whatever LaBSS [is] teaching us, they already know. But, that's not true. LaBSS expand the skills you already have.

Another student reinforced this.

Good and bad. So, for the good part, some students don't know how to print up their resume, or know how to use their posture in their voice, or advocate for themselves in interviews. Another thing about LaBSS that I liked, like you said, [is that] we get advisors in the class and I felt it was good to have that class once a week. Because, let's say you didn't have class and they do provide an advisor [for] the first-year students, some students are not going to take time out of their day, or week, out of their whole semester to go meet up with their advisor. So, having to see them once a week and developing a personal relationship with them I think is helpful. For the bad part, for the students who know how to do their resume, for the students who have multiple jobs, who know how to do good in interviews, it's just a waste of their time.



However, it is precisely the connection between the skills-based learning in LaBSS and the academic learning in EOW that provides students a clearer understanding of why skills (such as mastering an elevator pitch) are part of the social capital expected in the workplace. EOW provides the conceptual framework for students to understand and also challenge the explicit and implicit norms of professional work. Further, the secondary importance of LaBSS in the minds of some students could be a window into why students often say that standalone College 101 classes have limited long-term value—a finding that research confirms.

I see that LaBSS was intertwined with the goal of EOW . . . it addressed the more practical or indirect things that you're not directly taught about the life of work. You know there's the, like, on the books things that you're supposed to do and then there's stuff off the books.

Another student shared:

The elevator pitch. I hated it! I didn't know how to sell myself. I'm like, what do I write? I have no confidence in myself. They have to like come up with something, anything just to sell it to somebody. So, it made me understand other things that are behind the scenes of this implicit, we learned in EOW class.

EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE

In addition to students, we conducted a focus group with three of our employers—one of color, the other two white. We note, of course, that this is a very small sample, and thus will follow up at a later date with additional employers.⁵

One finding that emerged was that employers approached the ethnographic aspect of the workplace visits somewhat differently depending on their workplace. One employer encountered the challenge that, in his office, all that could be seen was “desk work” and work-related conversation. He was concerned that this would not be conducive to rich observation. However, after hosting students, this employer and a second one realized that to have a realistic view of the workplace, students must see that work is a mix of excitement and routine.

Because you framed it within ethnographic anthropology type of perspective, they will be observers and then, reading through the materials you sent, I actually realized our observations were not observations at all. They were interviews the whole entire time. I think that's because we're two persons / three persons, right. There is no space and observable work to see. And I knew that going into it that it was a bit challenging. I think that's why initially when you came to us, we were like, well, there really isn't anything to see here . . . [we're] on our computer, that's it. We talk to each other, that's literally our work. But I think you at some point must have talked to us about like, that's okay, that's what the work life is. So, I think the first time [a student came to] observe us, we tried that observation thing but we were just so awkward and weird, I'm just sitting on my computer and typing. So, that was both the expectation and change over time.

It's okay for [work] to be boring, it's just like that's kind of reality. But, I would say, opposite that perspective, I do think it's important to know that everyday work is not super thrilling. Sometimes I have to do really boring things, but that's just what life is. And I do actually think, as interns, sometimes adults feel awkward about that so they show off the jazzy stuff. So, maybe [it's] a blend of both.

Other employers noted their satisfaction in being able to show students new environments and exciting work which was conducive to student observation.

I guess because of what I do, I go out in the field a lot, so I was able to take my student under my wing. [The students] heard how I had conversations with them, you know

meet with them, and just this and that. So that was, you know, she loved that. She was like, "Oh, wow." We've got to go out and, you know, hustle in the streets and visit. She got to see exactly. How did it make the magic, [the] magic that we do? But you know, this is part of it.

I think what's unique about our space is that, we're now in the World Trade Center and we're at Four World Trade, so it's right in front of the memorial. So they get to come to a really cool space . . . with wide open spaces, everyone's in a cubicle. We have fantastic views. And so, taking them around the floor and letting them see different conference rooms, you know, just things that I may not think about every day but things that may be significant to them. One portion of our staff, who does the finances, is behind a locked door, a closed door, right. So, just getting them to think about where people sit, why that's important. Our contract people sit on the other side; they're a little more quiet than we are. And then we call our conference rooms "the fish bowls," because, everything is clear glass. So, you would know what it's like to be in a space where it doesn't feel like there's any privacy anywhere. So, those are the kinds of things that I think are helpful for them because it's a different kind of space, a newer space and all the technology is new.

STUDENT PROFESSIONALISM

One of the central aspects of the course is that students visit professional workplaces to observe and interview workers. Many Guttman students are just a few months out of high school when they make their first visits. During our conversation with employers we asked how the students presented themselves in the workplace. Ideally, students would present themselves as researchers, building on the knowledge they were gaining in both EOW and LaBSS. And in some cases, students met those expectations.

They were very kind. Very polite manners coming from Guttman. They were focused.

They had their questions like, yes, they had, they did their homework. They had everything, you know, set out; they were writing down notes.

However, in other instances, the employers reported that students exhibited some behaviors that did not meet professionalism standards.

I had some that were late and some who were on time. Some that seemed a bit more distant, it's like, over time though, you kind of learned to not perceive quietness or distance as not interested . . . So, yeah, I think they are all fairly professional . . . I don't expect 18- to 19-year-olds to necessarily ask me super high-level questions. But, over time, I find myself leading the questions.

I would say 40 percent of them are super thrilled and engaged, and some of them sit there. And that's just life, I'm not shocked. The fact that some of them were more into it is just how it is.

I think I emailed them, you know, about the view to say that I was really disappointed because I had really crafted this really great day for them, you know, or carved out this time for them. And so, you know, that's part of learning, too. Like, if you're not able to show up or you're going to be late, you have to email, you have to call. I made sure that they had my desk phone number, my email, and my personal cell phone number. So, I tried to make sure they could communicate with me at all times but unfortunately, this past year, it didn't work out.

CHALLENGES

As EOW is a unique class for both teacher and student, our focus groups highlight some of the areas of the course that we continue to evolve to address challenges. To sum up the challenges noted above, visiting a workplace as an ethnographer is a new experience—particularly for young students straight out of high school, many of whom are low income and of color, observing majority white workplaces.

One way that Guttman has begun to help students better prepare—both for the ethnographic framework and for the professional work setting—is to introduce workshops into the summer bridge program (a mandated two-week program for all first-year students.) During the summer of 2018, faculty and staff developed two workshops—“Introduction to Ethnography” and “I am an Emerging Professional!”—that were delivered in the 2019 bridge program. The guiding idea of these workshops is to provide some exposure to critical skills in both EOW and LaBSS as early as possible in a student’s college tenure. The goal is to better prepare them for their workplace visits in EOW.

Developing observation sites for students to conduct ethnographic work is itself a significant challenge. Guttman is fortunate in that the campus is located in midtown Manhattan, providing relatively easy access to public workplaces (such as train stations, parks, coffeehouses and markets). However, access to worksites that are less public (particularly those for the semester-long, career exploration projects) often involves a significant amount of work to identify sites, negotiate access, and organize the experience. In the past, this work has often fallen on faculty—adding an additional layer of work to teaching the course. And trying to identify contacts and networks for student visits may be out of faculty’s expertise. In addition, depending on students to identify the contacts—while providing opportunities for developing important networking skills—may limit the career options to explore. This is particularly true of students who aspire to

careers in such fields as banking and finance, information technology, the sciences, and the like. These are not fields most can access in their existing family and community networks.

For the past two years, faculty partnered with the Office of Partnerships and Community Engagement to help make those workplace connections. This requires additional planning—students must identify their career interests very early in the semester and OPCE staff must build on college networks to try to align those interests with workplaces. Over the past year, OPCE has placed over 200 Guttman students into workplaces for their EOW research. Through this process, the labor-intensive nature of this work is quite evident. In many ways this is a “high touch” ask. College staff who solicit employer engagement must often spend a significant amount of time explaining EOW to employers along with helping them understand the role the students will perform in their workplaces. As is evident from the conversation with employers, making clear the distinction between the Guttman students’ research tasks and hosting a student intern or work-study employee is critical to ensuring that both student and employer have a positive experience.

Further, Guttman continues to work on better alignment between LaBSS and EOW. As the focus groups demonstrate, students may not fully understand the connection between the two parts of the course and the value of that connection. Over the past few years, Guttman faculty and advisors have engaged material connections (such as shared gradebook; units listed on both LaBSS and EOW syllabi; and faculty and advisors visiting each other’s courses), along with non-material curriculum alignment. While we have made progress, it is clear that more work needs to be done to fully integrate the LaBSS and EOW experience.

CONCLUSION

The big headline emerging from this research is that the combination of applying ethnographic methods and teaching concepts to describe what one sees arms students with new analytic tools. These tools not only make workplaces interesting sites for observation but enhance students’ agency as they enter with the identity of “researcher.” Most importantly, the combination of readings, observation, and LaBSS helps students choose work based on information that they would not have had without these courses, and, once at work, understand dynamics in a workplace.

EOW also introduces students to a new set of people, and potentially a network to which they would not otherwise have had access; it increases students’ social capital, a value they understand from class readings and discussion. Finally, the impact for these young people is that knowing about what happens at work, especially in low-skill jobs, helps them be more tolerant and understanding of the often-negative moods their parents bring home from work. Still—and this is the observation of the authors—students have a long journey ahead, and many

have what we call “an aspirations gap.” That is, unlike their privileged peers who simply expect to have jobs that are both satisfying and lucrative, these students need to develop a greater sense of entitlement to work that is productive. In doing so, many students will be not only the first in their families to earn college degrees, but the first to say, “I’m looking forward to going to work today.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Debra Humphreys, “Next-Generation Quality Assurance for Tomorrow’s Talent,” *News & Views* (blog), *Lumina Foundation*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/qa-commons>.

² Melinda Mechur Karp et al., “Revising a College 101 Course for Sustained Impact: Early Outcomes,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 41, no. 1 (2016): 42-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1152929>.

³ Guttman Community College is the newest college in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Guttman students are, for the most part, traditional aged and predominately identify as Hispanic and black /African American.

⁴ The authors would like to thank Andrea Juncos for her assistance on this research.

⁵ The employers in our small focus group were all women. Two of the employers were black /African American and one was white.