

**A System in Need of Repair:
The College Work Study Program**

Kenneth C. Petress

Before 1965, needy college students were caught in a wrenching bind. They were faced with a series of bad choices: (1) they could apply for scholarships and grants, most of which had award limits below the minimal cost of a college education; (2) they could apply for student loans, few of which paid the entire costs even when some scholarships and/or grant money was available, and which left successful college students deeply in debt and which tragically invited unsuccessful college drop-outs to face long-term debt or default on their loans; or (3) they could add to the burden of full time school attendance with one or more part time jobs to generate needed income. Such jobs often generated enough revenue to get through the first year; however, these students discovered the following year that their need-based grants and scholarships as well as loans were lowered to match the added income earned in the previous year from the part-time work. It was a catch-22 -- the more you earned, the less subsidy you were offered, which caused more work to be needed to break even, which caused an even greater problem the following year.

Many students never made it that far. Part-time jobs are not plentiful -- at least not ones with schedules adaptable to college student school schedules. Some students were squeezed by this bind so severely they dropped out in frustration or their grades suffered so badly they lost financial aid eligibility. The system was generating two painful problems; both needed quick solutions. First, many potentially successful college students were unable to manage adequately with the current financial aid package; second, numbers of loans, grants, and scholarships were going for naught due to aborted matriculations by students unable to sustain attendance due to unresolved financial burdens.

Government and academic officials came to recognize these student problems as genuine, on going, and unsolvable without some form of government help. Intuitively, the easiest and quickest solution to this dilemma was to raise the institutional scholarship, government grants, and loans levels. Schools balked at suggestions that they raise scholarship levels, citing limits set by private donors and a desire to help, not totally subsidize, students' education. Colleges recognized the financial slippery slope they were being invited to slide down and curtly declined the offer. U.S. Department of Education officials and congressional leaders clearly saw the political,

social, and legal pitfalls and entanglements that increases in the then current financial aid sources would involve; but they also saw the urgent need to do something to help.

It was more of an image problem than a substantive one that government officials faced. They were committed to help; the big issue was to promote new assistance in a favorable and acceptable fashion. That meant revenues had to be dedicated to needy college students, but this aid had to be packaged and advertised in such a way so as not to anger voter constituents and so as to make their efforts appear noble, affordable, and non political. This was a Herculean challenge; one that was eventually solved by a creative plan, by letting needy college students work at jobs within or near the university under mandates that required job supervision and scheduling cooperation with students thus assuring them of enhanced matriculating opportunities. A plan, called the College Work Study Program that came under the aegis of the 1965 Economic Opportunity Act, was devised whereby colleges would be allocated federal funds according to anticipated students' established need to hire students to do genuine work consistent with student abilities. Federal funds would pay the greater percentage of the student wages for work study eligible students; the remainder would be borne by the employer. This system looked great; it did require dedicated funds, but that was greatly off-set by (1) the fact that these funds were spent over time, not all at once; (2) college students' welfare, food stamps, and unemployment payments would be drastically cut; and (3) this idea was cloaked in the work ethic: it required college students to work for their college subsidy, an idea very appealing to most voters.

This well intentioned system has some major pitfalls, however; it has engendered discrimination against students not eligible for the work study program and has resulted in some unproductive expenditures in federal tax dollars. These were unintended and unrecognized outcomes when the system was inaugurated. The original College Work Study Program was designed to allow select employers (both campus and the private sector) to hire needy financial aid receiving students and to not have their wages directly count against their next year's award eligibility. The system was not designed to (1) cause academic institutions to hire exclusively work study students to jobs, nor (2) to create make-work jobs to provide a financial aid subsidy. Both of these circumstances are now common at many schools. Schools quickly found how profitable federally subsidized wages were and took unfair advantage of the system. Such conditions are not the total fault of greedy employers; fault also is properly

attributed to hastily and carelessly constructed legislation which failed to anticipate the current abuses and to a lack of federal super-vision or awareness as to how exactly the program works nationwide.

There are many campus jobs that are exclusively offered to work-study eligible students. Some campus employers have let jobs go unfilled due to their frustration at having to hire less qualified (in terms of job skills), less motivated, and less experienced work study students while more qualified, highly motivated, and experienced non work study applicants have been turned down solely because of the revenue source that would be used to pay those individuals' wages. In a number of instances, employers have complained that the "system" is further stacked against them. The program intends for employers to train, supervise, and mentor work study students while they are work study employees. In theory, this is a grand idea, and, in some jobs, is relatively easy to accomplish. However, numerous work study jobs require immediate, specific skills (ie: food service cooks, library personnel, computer lab workers, grounds keeping helpers); and micro management in these tasks is often not feasible; so some work study employees become a burden to employers.

Normally, this poses minor, correctable inconveniences: you discharge problematic employees and search for replacements. It isn't that simple, at least not at the four schools I have worked at. We work-study employers were told that if we discharged work study students (which we had every right to do with cause), we faced the real likelihood of not getting a prompt replacement, if at all. We, discharging employers, were placed last on a waiting list for "new" employees. In addition, it was later discovered, work study students who had been dismissed from other jobs were commonly sent as replacement candidates to fill job openings for recent discharging employers. This was a subtle and intimidating punishment. Several work study employers endure an ineffective work study student rather than suffer the agony of being placed on the discharging employer list.

Too often, tasks are defined as work study employment opportunities that would never exist if it were not for federal money paying for them. I do not believe it was the intention, in 1965, for artificial jobs to be created as ways of subsidizing needy college students. The intention, I believe, was to offer federally funded financial aid for eligible students who work at already existing or legitimately created new jobs. The system did not promote exclusive work study eligible hiring nor did it anticipate make work tasks would receive federal support.

I believe potential student employees should be interviewed and screened for legitimate jobs independent of their financial aid status. The successful employment candidates should be hired and then their aid status would be used to determine the source of their wages. Thus, the employment discrimination against non work study students would disappear and worthless jobs would vanish due to the need for institutions having to pay total wages for such jobs should non work-study students be hired. This plan would cost academic institutions more but it would be more in keeping with the moral and philosophic intent of the program. Perhaps some jobs that have emerged as a result of the work study program are worthy and would not be affordable for institutions on their own. A different form of federal subsidy seems appropriate to cover such costs, but not one that continues or causes discrimination against non work study students. It's time we cease identifying the College Work Study Program as a "gravy train" for some academic institutions and as a questionable, for some, subsidy for students and remake it into the work ethic centered proposal that was intended in 1965.

One other unintended problem has been created by the exclusive work study job classification. That problem is the presence of stigma. Many jobs on campus are known as "work study jobs" and both the task and the student employer are stigmatized; lower pecking order status for the job, diminished expectations of the employee by peers, supervisors, and others whom that student employee encounters, and lower self esteem for student employees often result.

The College Work Study Program was designed to aid needy college students not to stigmatize them, not to make them unwitting agents of job discrimination, and not to act as a welfare mechanism by paying for make-work jobs. The College Work study Program is a genuinely creative, worthwhile idea; it needs some fine tuning, closer and more rigorous supervision, and clearer promoting of its original goals.