
Work-based learning's hands-on practice shows promise that it can help increase students' workplace competencies and benefit employers. This commentary is [part of a series](#) on issues relevant to congressional efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act.

While preparing students for meaningful employment is an important goal of our nation's higher education system, [most employers say](#) that students are not acquiring the right skills. Specifically, graduates are entering into the work world not knowing how to be successful in the job market, and worse, lacking key 21st-century workplace competencies, such as critical thinking and active listening.

While current employer perceptions of college graduates are not good news, they are in no way the end of the story. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) offers an opportunity for college grads to become more work savvy through work-based learning (WBL) experiences. This will encourage a tighter connection between higher education and employers and the attainment of key employability skills.

WBL engages students in an array of work-related activities, from informational interviews in the classroom to job shadowing and skills-specific training at the workplace. There is ample evidence of the benefits of WBL. For example, a 2008 [study \(PDF\)](#) found that graduates of applied occupational programs reported applied learning experiences such as WBL as the most helpful in developing work skills. There are [benefits \(PDF\)](#) for employers as well: WBL programs like internships and apprenticeships often serve as a workforce pipeline for companies. Employers participating in WBL programs can train students and then hire them upon graduation.

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The benefits of WBL are not limited to college students and their potential employers. There is evidence of success at the K-12 level and with “upskilling” adult workers as well. For example, a RAND Corporation [evaluation](#) of a New York City high school program that offered students local internships in manufacturing and transportation found that students who participated in the program were more likely to enter these fields after high school. There is also evidence that students who participated in the program earned higher wages than those who did not.

What could Congress consider during the HEA reauthorization process as potential avenues to foster and strengthen WBL?

- Increasing federal support, such as via competitive grants and funding to states, to boost the availability of WBL opportunities. WBL [requires \(PDF\)](#) strong partnerships and resources to support employers and students in order to be successful, which necessitates sufficient and dedicated time and resources. Higher education institutions could use the funding to redevelop course curriculum, partner with employers who could offer WBL opportunities, or provide

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scholarships to students to participate in paid WBL opportunities to offset some costs for employers. Having colleges use federal funds to provide stipends or scholarships to students could also encourage businesses that do not have the capacity or resources to offer paid WBL programs to partner with colleges.

- Incentivizing industry partnerships to develop effective work-based learning programs. The most authentic WBL experiences come from industry partners, who are key stakeholders in starting and scaling WBL programs. [RAND studies have found](#) that instructors who directly partnered with employers designed more appropriate courses in the STEM fields. However, many firms [lack resources \(PDF\)](#) to develop WBL programs on their own. Industry or sector partnerships reduce the burdens on individual businesses by convening local stakeholders to develop programs and initiatives that meet the needs of local employers and bringing in the expertise of higher education to structure the WBL programs appropriately for students.
- Encouraging the tracking of program outcomes. In order to determine which aspects of WBL are working at a more systemic level, states need data that spans the entire education to workforce pipeline. A reauthorized HEA could encourage state Departments of Education and Departments of Labor to enter data sharing agreements with higher education institutions to track important outcomes during postsecondary education and after. States could also participate in federal efforts like the U.S. Department of Labor's [Workforce Data Quality Initiative](#) and the U.S. Department of Education's Statewide Longitudinal Data System. Earnings, employment, type of job, job retention and educational outcomes of graduates from WBL-informed higher education programs could be tracked to gauge the effectiveness of WBL programs over time. Some states do not have these data available, because they are housed in disparate systems that are not linked.

Work-based learning's hands-on practice shows promise that it can help increase students' workplace competencies and benefit employers, who gain more qualified employees. If they were to choose to strengthen these programs, policymakers could address both employer and graduates' needs.

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Commentary gives RAND researchers a platform to convey insights based on their professional expertise and often on their peer-reviewed research and analysis.

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