

Retention 101: Put Students To Work

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Research indicates that students who work part-time on campus while attending college are more likely to graduate. They also feel better prepared for the workforce through development of leadership skills, and become more active and engaged citizens.

In our careers as college and university presidents, we have established work programs on several campuses, successfully replicating a model that pays dividends in important ways. Most prominent in our experience is an improved overall rate of 7 to 10 percent in student retention.

At Scott's Virginia Wesleyan University, a work program provides not only a meaningful learning experience- helping students contribute to their career portfolios-but it also reduces debt and makes higher education more affordable. The most compelling reason students do not complete their undergraduate education is finances.

Therefore, students who can pay off tuition obligations are much more likely to return.

The Opus work program at Virginia Wesleyan began with 20 students with financial need who wanted to continue their studies but had tuition balances due. Preference was given to rising sophomores and juniors with a personal account balance owed of \$2,000 to \$3,000, and who also demonstrated, in addition to financial need, a commitment to academic studies and campus involvement.

Participating students lived on campus in residential housing and were provided with modest meal plans. They began their duties following the May Commencement and worked 25 hours per week for 13 weeks. Projects focused on corrective maintenance, grounds and landscaping, and general campus beautification-all under the supervision of administrative staff.

The major goals from the Opus program were to ensure the completion of a liberal arts education for students with limited financial resources; to develop strong work ethic, communication and problem-solving skills; to give the future graduates the professional and technical knowledge essential for their work and the executive skills required to plan, organize and prioritize tasks; to build a reliable source of workers who were knowledgeable, skilled and likely to remain in the region; and to increase campus pride among students.

The student workforce was also a welcome addition to the physical-plant staff during the summer term when parking lots needed to be relined, landscaping tended to, and residence halls cleaned.

Of Virginia Wesleyan's total enrollment of 1,500, some 300 students already work in some capacity during the fall and spring terms. The University plans to expand the program during the summer and throughout the year-doubling the number of students participating.

At one of Scott's previous institutions, work opportunities were increased by 90 percent; retention, by 8 percent.

An added benefit can come by way of the advancement office. In Virginia Wesleyan's case, a donor who believed strongly in the value of student work programs stepped forward with a lead gift to fund the first years of the program.

It's important to recruit selectively for work programs, creating an environment in which students can succeed, can perform the work safely, and can take from the experience skills that are relevant to their career goals. Not all work has to be manual labor. Each year, we have assigned students with strong communication and interpersonal skills as presidential associates, working alongside regular, full-time staff in the president's office. Most are appointed for the academic year and can be reappointed for additional years.

Recruitment and retention of students are the central goals of any enrollment plan; they are vital to the overall ' budgetary health of institutions. Just as important, administrators need to be alert to opportunities that enrich students' experiences through expanded academic and co-curricular options. Such work programs serve as valuable tools in creating greater financial stability and ease for students at risk of dropping out-helping to ensure that they walk across the commencement stage on time, degrees in hand.

About the Authors

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