Ethnographies of Work: A Social Mobility and Equity Initiative at Guttman Community College (GCC)

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Colleges and universities are increasingly recognizing 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 (Humphreys 2017). 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 or interviewing or the job search; and perhaps a visit to the career centers late in their 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 or career pathways, how their majors do (or do not) align with labor market needs, a real understanding of the day to day life in many careers that they have interest in, and how to use the networks of family and friends, teachers and professors to connect with opportunity and to be seen as an asset. This lack of attention to career preparation only serves to intensify the class divide, leaving the most privileged students to anticipate and prepare for professional careers like those of their parents while students from low-income families continue to think of work mainly as a way to survive.

The strategy that colleges deploy most frequently is to require students to take an academic success class, often called generically College 101. 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 (Karp, Raufman and Efthimiou, 2016). And not surprisingly, research shows that while such courses have a short-term positive impact, that impact fades over time (Karp et al., 2012). A second way colleges address the issue is to offer short term workshops that teach students 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 a set of 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.

**Guttman’s Solution**

Guttman Community College has developed a career-preparation alternative in *Ethnographies of Work* (EOW), a required first-year course which 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—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 a workplace as an intern, 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 often first read an academic ethnographic text about a particular workplace dynamic—such as hierarchical leadership structures. They then will visit selected workplaces to replicate the ethnographic study. In doing so, they are able to use theory and observational methods to gain critical cultural knowledge while learning first-hand about specific workplaces they may one day enter.

EOW is a two-part, year-long college course and set of experiences that give students tools for understanding and addressing the challenges and opportunities they 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. While taking EOW, students complete a paired co-requisite advisement-centered course, *Learning About Being a Successful Student* (LaBSS), which explores academic majors and develops some of the soft skills necessary to enter the workplace setting successfully during their EOW projects, as well as in the future for internships or other work-based learning experiences.

In EOW I, the students master ethnographic methods: research design, observation, workplace mapping and interviewing. The signature course assignment is a semester long ethnographic investigation of a career/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 (interviewing, observation) which are necessary for success both in 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 only a credential is needed. EOW students are asked to reflect on their own workplace and community experiences with a social science lens, gaining new insights on their
work lives. Their year-long exploration directly engages students with working people as informants and equips them with deep knowledge about employer expectations and behaviors. They can become better job seekers, 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 in entering the labor market; and helps students see and understand their own networks and engage new ones. Armed with that knowledge, students who understand how networks operate will enter the job market more successfully.

Why a Center?

Center for Social Mobility and Equity

The integration of career-focused learning into the college curriculum is a new model in American colleges and universities. As such, the Center will provide the support that schools need; create a community of practitioners that will advance the model and policies that support the model; and conduct rigorous research. The Center will act as a hub for this research and related best practices, as well as collaborative opportunities related to the mission.

Guttman Community College is establishing a center to lead this effort. The center will:

- Work directly with colleges and high schools to develop EOW courses and other curriculum innovations.
- Hold regional and national convenings to share experiences and models; disseminate best practices and influence policies.
- Conduct research and evaluation to provide evidenced-based assessments of programs.
- Contribute to state and policy discussion to drive an agenda that infuses careers into the college curriculum in an academically rigorous manner.
- Help engage national employers and professional organizations to develop partnerships that schools can use.
- Develop a resource databank

References
