

Positioning student employment as experiential learning

A workbook for designing higher-quality
student employment experiences

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Using this workbook

Student employment is often viewed only through the lens of meeting operational needs, like covering shifts, completing tasks, processing work, staffing desks, and keeping campus functions moving. Consider that being employed teaches students a lot of important things, like the examples below.

This workbook is designed to guide you and your colleagues through examining student employment through an experiential learning lens. This helps identify where learning is already happening in campus roles, how a role could become more developmental, and which positions may be strong candidates for formal experiential learning recognition. Blank space for notes is provided throughout. The goal is not to force every student job into a formal category. In fact, not every student job will rise to the level of formal experiential learning for every student – and that is ok! The goal is to use an experiential learning lens to create higher-quality student employment experiences across the board.

Positioning student employment as experiential learning

Student employees already learn valuable skills while advancing institutional functions

As you examine student employment through the experiential learning lens, lead with the question **“What is this job already teaching, and how could we make learning more intentional?”**

Framing your examination that way prevents people from becoming bogged down in rigid, binary thinking about whether or not a job “counts” as experiential learning.

In just one of their roles, a student employee may be learning to:

- Communicate with different stakeholders
- Handle confidential or sensitive information
- Manage competing priorities and resources
- Give and receive feedback constructively
- Solve ambiguous problems in real-time
- Connect work to academic, personal, and career goals

Not every role has to (or will) become formal experiential learning

Not every role will meet the institutional criteria for experiential learning, nor will every role be an experiential learning opportunity for the student in the role. That is fine and expected.

How closely a role aligns with formal experiential learning may depend on:

- The nature of the work, tasks, responsibilities
- Institutional experiential learning criteria
- Students’ goals, program, professional purpose
- Whether learning is documented, assessed, or formally recognized
- Presence of reflection and feedback

Roles still become stronger, more developmental, more reflective, and more valuable to the student and the department, when examined and redesigned through the experiential learning lens, regardless of whether it aligns with formal experiential learning.

Student employment exists on a continuum

It is helpful to think about student employment as a continuum, rather than think about student jobs as “experiential learning” or “not experiential learning.” This allows flexibility when assessing roles and approaching programming. It also recognizes that positions can move side-to-side across the continuum, depending on changes to the role responsibilities and the characteristics of the student that inhabits it.



Definitions:

- **Basic student job:** provides income, task experience, operational support
- **Developmental student job:** adds feedback, skill-building, belonging, professional growth on top of basic student job foundational skills
- **Learning-centered student job:** incorporates intentional outcomes, coaching, structured reflection, in addition to the developmental and basic job elements
- **Experiential learning opportunity:** meets institutional criteria and is documented, assessed, and recognized, on top of learning-centered, developmental, and basic elements

Moving roles along the continuum

Use this workbook to move student employment roles along the continuum. You could:

- Move a basic student job toward a developmental, toward a learning-centered role
- Identify roles that could meet experiential learning opportunity criteria
- Assess roles for their place on the continuum on a case-by-case basis

All outcomes are valuable, and there are likely many more uses of the workbook!

Reframing student jobs

A good place to start when examining student employment through the experiential learning lens is changing, and reframing, how the work is understood, supervised, and discussed. That helps identify which strong elements exist and which elements require redesign or addition later.

Traditional framing	Developmental or experiential framing
Answer phones	Practice professional communication with multiple stakeholder groups
Staff the front desk	Triage competing priorities for stakeholders, represent the department
Help with events	Coordinate logistics, solve problems in real-time under ambiguity
Enter data	Process confidential data accurately and understand systems
Train new students	Develop leadership, mentoring, and instructional skills

When reframing responsibilities in student employment roles, sometimes the traditional framing is the most accurate framing for the reality of the work being performed. Try your best to reframe as many legitimate developmental or experiential elements as possible without stretching too far.

Three conditions for higher-quality student employment

Student jobs become stronger learning experiences when adding three conditions:

1. Intentional role design
2. Developmental supervision
3. Structured reflection and articulation

These conditions improve all jobs, regardless of where they fall along the continuum.

Intentional role design

A high-quality student employment role is designed with a learning purpose in addition to its operational purpose. The role responsibilities supporting the department, and learning outcomes, should be clear both to the student employee and to their supervisor.

When intentionally designing a role, include:

- A clear purpose
- Meaningful responsibilities
- Opportunities to practice skills
- Appropriate levels of judgement or decision-making
- Possibility for growth over time
- Learning outcomes connected to the work

Learning outcome examples for student employment roles

Learning outcomes often begin with a statement similar to “**By the end of this role, the student employee will be able to...**”

Below are examples of learning outcomes to finish that sentence:

- communicate complex information clearly to campus partners and stakeholders
- use professional judgement to prioritize competing needs
- apply confidentiality standards when handling sensitive information
- identify process improvements based on recurring issues

Developmental supervision

Developmental supervision looks like supervisors actively supporting their student employees' growth. Many supervisors do this naturally, and it is relatively easy to incorporate! It is intentionally adding the experiential learning lens to the supervision work they already perform.

Developmental supervision behaviors and practices examples

- Clear onboarding
- Coaching conversations
- Regular feedback
- Check-ins that center learning, not just task review
- Opportunities for students to adopt more responsibility
- Helping students connect work to skills and future career goals

Developmental supervision questions examples

- What is something you handled well this week?
- What did you learn from that situation?
- What skill do you think you practiced?
- What would you do differently next time?
- How might you describe this experience in an interview?

Structured reflection and articulation

Reflection helps students understand, and make meaning of, their experience. Without structured reflection, students may not understand what they learned from their role. Articulation helps them communicate that meaning to others. Without practicing articulating, students may not be able to communicate the value of what they learned on a resume, in interviews, on graduate school applications, or in future professional settings.

Structured reflection and articulation supervision practices examples

- End-of-shift reflection prompts
- Monthly learning check-ins
- End-of-term reflection conversations
- Resume bullet or interview question activities
- Portfolio or co-curricular record entries
- Feedback framed by career competencies

Structured reflection and articulation conversation prompts examples

- What problem did you solve recently?
- When did you have to use judgement?
- What is one skill you are developing through this job?
- What is one academic skill you learned that you apply while performing this job?
- How would you explain the value of this work to a future employer?

Role analysis tool

Purpose: Use this tool to examine one student employee role and determine how it could become more developmental, learning-centered, or formal experiential learning.

Part 1: Current role analysis

Position title:

Department or unit:

Primary operational purpose of the role:

Top 3 to 5 responsibilities of the role:

Part 2: What learning is already occurring in the role?

What authentic work (“real work”) is the student doing?

Which skills or competencies does the student practice while performing the role?

What judgement, communication, or problem-solving does the role require?

Which relationships, networks, or institutional knowledge does this role create?

What does the student learn about themselves, work, organizations, or their future goals?

Part 3: Where does this role fall on the experiential learning continuum?

1. Identify the place on the continuum that best fits the role right now:

Basic
student job

Developmental
student job

Learning-centered
student job

Formal experiential
learning opportunity

2. What would move this role one step closer toward formal experiential learning?

Part 4: Reframe the job

1. What is the traditional framing of at least one responsibility of this role?
2. What is the developmental or experiential reframing of that same responsibility?

Part 5: Intentional design

1. What is one possible learning outcome for this role?
2. What task or responsibility helps the student practice this outcome?
3. What could be added to make that learning more intentional?

Part 6: Developmental supervision

1. How does the supervisor currently give feedback?
2. What is one question the supervisor could ask regularly to support learning?
3. What is one way the student could take on more responsibility over time?

Part 7: Reflection and articulation

1. How could the student reflect on what they are learning?
2. How could they translate the experience into a resume bullet or interview answer?
3. What story should the student be able to tell after the job?

Part 8: Realistic next step

1. Choose the next step that is most realistic in this scenario:

Move this role from
basic to more
developmental

Move this role from
developmental to
learning-centered

Move this role toward
formal experiential
learning recognition

Improve role's quality
without experiential
learning recognition

2. One change I can make this semester toward this realistic next step is:

Campus positioning mapping tool

Purpose: Use this tool to identify how student employment could connect more intentionally to institutional priorities, whether through formal experiential learning recognition or broader job-quality improvement.

Part 1: Map the landscape

Campus priority	How student employment already contributes	What would make that contribution more visible or intentional?
Career readiness		
Experiential learning		
Student success or retention		
Equity and access		
Belonging or mentoring		
Workforce development		
(Add your own)		

Part 2: Formal recognition questions

1. Does your campus have formal criteria for experiential learning?

Yes No Unsure

2. If yes, could some student employee jobs meet those criteria with redesign?

Yes No Maybe Unsure

3. What would need to change for some of the jobs to meet those criteria?

Part 3: Broad quality improvement questions

1. For jobs that may not become formal experiential learning roles, what would still make them higher-quality student employment experiences?

Clearer expectations Better onboarding More feedback More belonging

More skill-building More flexibility More reflection Better career readiness

2. Other elements that would create higher-quality experiences:

Part 4: Next steps

- One campus-level conversation to start:

- One partner to involve:

- One feasible pilot or next step:

Possible campus-level strategies for change

When considering how to approach positioning student employment as experiential learning, and increasing the quality of all student jobs, it is helpful to lead with the question:

“What is one realistic change that would make student employment more visible as a contributor to student learning, career readiness, belonging, or success?”

Student employment can be elevated through small, medium, and large changes. A different approach will be required for each campus and, potentially, individual situations.

Possible campus-level strategies for change include:

- Including student employment in experiential learning language
- Identifying which student jobs could meet formal experiential learning criteria
- Adding learning outcomes to selected job descriptions
- Training supervisors on developmental supervision skills and practices
- Creating reflection prompts or student employee learning check-ins
- Partnering with career services to help students articulate learning
- Recognizing select student employment roles in career-readiness initiatives
- Including qualifying roles in co-curricular transcripts or experience records
- Improving baseline job quality for all student employees
- Piloting intentional experiential student employment in one division, department, or role type

Experiential learning lens reflection questions

What surfaced when you looked for learning that was already happening in a student job?

What became more meaningful when the learning was named?

Could the role you analyzed become formalized experiential learning? Why or why not?

If the role would not formally qualify, what changes would make it a stronger overall job?

What was easiest to redesign? What was hardest to redesign?

Two commitments to action

Before closing this workbook, after every use, write down two commitments to action:

One job-level commitment

One change I can make to help one student job become more developmental, learning-centered, or formally experiential:

One campus-level commitment

One conversation I can start to help position student employment differently on my campus:

Campus conversation guide

This guide can be used to start or continue conversations with partner offices, colleagues, campus leaders, supervisors, and other stakeholders related to student employment on your campus. Most conversations will start with as shared exploration about how student employment currently functions and the possibilities of what it could become.

Potential framing

I've learned about positioning student employment as experiential learning, and I think there may be some useful ideas for our campus. The idea was that we can use an experiential learning lens to make student jobs higher quality, more developmental, and easier for students to connect to their academic and career goals.

Questions to discuss

How do we currently talk about student employment?

- Mostly framed as staffing, payroll, coverage, task completion?
- Also framed as student learning, development, belonging, career readiness?

Where is learning already happening in our student jobs?

- Which roles already involve authentic work, responsibility, feedback, problem-solving?

Which roles might be strong candidates for more intentional design?

- Are there roles where learning outcomes, structured feedback, or reflection would be low-lift?

Do any roles have potential to meet formal experiential learning criteria?

- If yes, what would need to change?
- If not, how could those roles still become stronger developmental employment experiences?

What is one small pilot we could feasibly try?

- Could we start with one role, one department, one supervisor training, one reflection prompt, or one revised job description?

First-step proposal example

Could we choose one student employment role and use the role analysis tool to identify where learning is already happening, what could be strengthened, and whether the role could move one step along the continuum toward a more developmental or learning-centered experience?

Notes