

Guttman Community College Puts “Work” at the Center of Learning:
An Approach to Student Economic Mobility
By Nancy Hoffman

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In Short:

- Higher education is supposed to lead to upward mobility. But mobility data suggests that even with a degree those who are born poor, of color, who choose the wrong major, or all three, struggle in the labor market.
- Guttman Community College, the first new college at CUNY in 40 years, puts career development and learning about work at the center of the curriculum.
- Students take three courses the first year: Statistics, City Seminar and Ethnographies of Work (EOW).
- EOW, a liberal arts course, addresses the world of work in intellectually challenging and respectful ways, making learning about work and the labor market both an academic and experiential endeavor.

Interviewer: How do you learn about different jobs?

Guttman second semester student in Ethnographies of work:

Student: You become an ethnographer!

Young people from prospering families accrue material benefits from having securely employed parents and also learn how important having productive work can be to adult well-being. It is not a surprise that data from a number of sources shows that children of well-off families are disproportionately likely to stay well off. They start with assets, see the benefits of a career, and know how to get ahead (Chetty, et al., 2014). A child born to parents in the highest quintile is five times more likely to end up in the highest quintile than the lowest (40 percent versus 8 percent) (Chetty, et al., 2014; Pew Charitable Trusts and Russell Sage, 2015; Reeves, 2014.).

But frightening data shows that children of poor families are very likely to remain poor. A child born to parents with an income in the lowest quintile is more than ten times more likely to end up in the lowest quintile than the highest as an adult (43 percent versus 4 percent). These results run counter to the historic vision of the United States as a land of equal opportunity (Chetty, et al., 2014; Pew Charitable Trusts and Russell Sage, 2015; Reeves, 2014.)

The message so many low-income young people hear today is: get a college degree, and all else will fall into place. Every young person in the United States, whatever his or her background, wants to grow up to be economically self sufficient, to have a stable and productive career. So “college” is the aspiration for nearly 90 percent of high school seniors who say they will pursue some form of postsecondary education after high school, and nearly 66 percent do in fact enroll in postsecondary education upon graduating high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

But if higher education is supposed to be the engine for getting young people to a degree, it isn't working very well. First, the numbers of low-income young people who attain either associate's or bachelor's degrees remains depressingly low. Second, the mobility data suggests that even with a degree there are challenges for those who are born poor, of color, who choose the wrong major, or all three. (Pell Institute, 2016; Carnevale et al., 2015, 2016) For example, in 2013, 53% of young 4-year degree holders were either unemployed or underemployed. (Abel, Deitz, and Su, 2014 , a,b). And a recent report showed that African Americans are overrepresented in majors leading to low-paying jobs and have higher rates of unemployment than their white peers with similar degrees (Carnevale et al., 2016).

How then can we ensure that those low-income young people who manage to graduate are equipped with the confidence, social skills, and knowledge required to navigate the labor market successfully? For every young person in the United States, whatever their background, one of the essential purposes of schooling should be to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and competence needed to search for and obtain work that they find at least reasonably satisfying. And yet, our educational system does little to introduce young people to the working world or to prepare them for just how large a role work is likely to play in the rest of their lives.

Even among community college and 4-year institutions that do have resources and commitment 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. Students graduate with little knowledge of the labor market, how their majors do (or do not) align with labor market needs, and perhaps most important, 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 (Hoffman, 2015).

Although educators have little capacity to create jobs, change tax policy, or slow globalization, they do have capacity to build students' social capital. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines social capital as, “networks together with shared norms, values and understands that facilitate cooperation within or among groups“ (OECD, 2007). According to the OECD, the definition might be visualized as concentric circles or networks composed of “bonds, bridges and links,” with

the connections between each moving from family and close friends, to distant friends and colleagues, to those further up or down the social ladder (OECD, 2007).

The greater the “dose” of social capital, the more likely a credentialed young person is to move beyond family and community bonds to activate promising connections to the labor market. A small body of research related to Granovetter’s decades old work on “the strength of weak ties” explores the way in which job referrals do or do not get made among African American low wage workers. (Granovetter, 1973; Smith, 2008, 2010). Similar lines of research could shed light on the degree to which social capital influences whether the credential a graduate earns fulfills its promise. The question then is how education institutions can enable low-income students to accumulate the social capital, the networks and networking skills, that will make them stand out in the job market when they compete with their confident, well-connected upper middle class peers. What do their LinkedIn networks look like? With whom do they know to connect?

One could say that Guttman Community College is conducting an experiment to find out.

GUTTMAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TEACHING ABOUT WORK

Guttman Community College, the first new college in the CUNY system in 40 years, was designed to introduce students to the integral connection between intellectual exploration, acquisition of concrete skills and knowledge, and career development. Its first class of 289 students entered in 2012 after several years of planning that drew on the latest experience and research not only on how to support first generation students to complete a degree, but also to enter the labor market in a sector with a career ladder and middle income wages. The college has a strong philosophical and pedagogical commitment to experiential and workplace learning combined with rigorous academics.

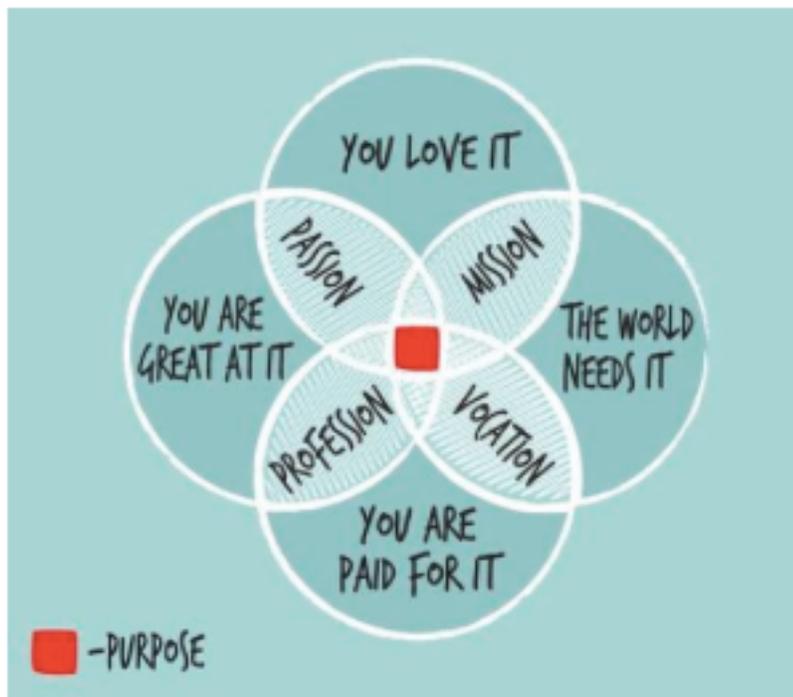
All Guttman students attend full time, and all have enrolled with the understanding that the college will prepare them for a limited number of career areas—all areas of job growth for the City of New York—as well as for transfer to 4-year institutions. Students must attend an 8-10 day summer bridge program prior to the first semester and are placed in cohorts or learning communities within houses. Today the student body is under 1000, but the intention is to grow the college to around 5000. Students come from all boroughs of New York, typically immediately from high school; 85% are 19 or younger. The student body is about 55% Hispanic, 26% African American, and 13% white, with a small number of Pacific Islanders, and there is substantial language diversity. The majority are female.

Guttman has an innovative approach to the first year experience, which aims to empower students to approach career choice intelligently. Students take three common courses in their first year: Statistics, City Seminar (about New York City topics such as sustainability, food, housing, gentrification, consumerism, and immigration), and

Ethnographies of Work (EOW). EOW gives students tools for understanding and addressing the challenges and opportunities they face in the labor market, but it does so in both a theoretical and applied context. Students interview people doing jobs of interest to them, but they also read ethnographic studies, books about work like *Gig*, and Marx and Weber.

One might state the theory of action behind Guttman’s curriculum, especially the first year, this way: *Students who understand the meaning of work in human lives, the sociology of the professions, and who have some professional work experience will have greater agency in entering the labor market than those who believe only a credential is needed. In addition, students who understand the challenges that being different impose in the work world—being working class or dark skinned or speaking with an accent—will, armed with that knowledge, enter the job market more successfully.*

EOW is a critical element in this project, a unique liberal arts college course providing a very different way of introducing students to the world of careers. It is unusual for “work” as a concept to be at the center of the first year college curriculum, to be the subject of investigation. This is quite different from having students spend the first year getting general education requirements “out of the way.” The graphic below from one EOW syllabus nicely expresses the spirit and aim of the course. Students come to understand the centrality of having a purpose and the multiplicity of factors—several of which may be in tension with each other—that go into choosing and staying with work that is satisfying.



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EOW: ETHNOGRAPHY, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND WORK

Ethnographies of Work I introduces students to sociological and anthropological perspectives on work as they investigate a range of careers. The course approaches work as a cultural system invested with meanings, norms, values, customs, behavioral expectations, and social hierarchies. Students pose key questions through the lens of ethnography in order to investigate workplaces, occupations, and career pathways in an urban context. Guided by the ethnographer's assumption that there's "always more than meets the eye," students are encouraged to uncover myths and stereotypes about the work world and gain appreciation of how and why work matters to individuals in a range of occupations. Students explore dimensions of work life in the context of contemporary dynamics of disruption, uncertainty, innovation, and diversity, and draw connections between the self and work through readings, films, interviews, and fieldwork. The centerpiece of the course is for students to compose and present ethnographic accounts of workplace relations and vocational pathways as they contemplate their own career journeys. Ethnographies of Work I satisfies three credits in the Individual and Society area of the CUNY Flexible Core.

EOW students also participate in a weekly 90-minute advisement session focused on Learning About Being a Successful Student as a supplement to the course. Building on the weekly topics of Ethnographies of Work I, LABSS integrates the skills necessary for success in college and careers and encourage students to reflect on the relationships between academic, personal, and professional goals. The session is facilitated by a Student Success Advocate and offers frequent opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of key skills, to share and develop their strengths, to provide support and encouragement to peers, to learn from others, and to address the stresses of college life. Participation in LABSS is required.

Unit 1: Researching Work (September 9 to September 30)

In this unit you will be introduced to sociological research and the method of ethnography as a sociological approach to understand the patterns, structures and experiences of individuals in the worlds of work. In addition you will explore some of the ways we look at work sociologically.

Unit 2: Groups/Structures at Work (October 5- November 4)

You will learn about workplace culture, social structures and the role of social class in the workplace. You will learn how culture is created in the workplace, and key components of corporations in the US. You will also explore how social class is created, experiences and produced in workplaces. Finally, you will also learn about observational research methods and complete observational research as part of their course paper.

Unit 3: Individuals at Work (November 9-November 25)

You will explore work choices from the perspective of the workers. You will learn about factors that shape work choices including family, race, gender and education. You will also learn about interview methodologies as an approach to learn about workers and workplaces; and draw conclusions from individual level data.

Unit 4: Making Sense of Ethnographic Work Data (December 2-December 9)

You will expand your analytical skills as you make sense of the field data you have collected over the semester. You will exchange works in progress for peer review and present findings to class. </BOX>

To understand the goals and philosophy of EOW, I interviewed Mary Gatta, Associate Professor of Sociology at Guttman, and twice visited her EOW class, in October 2015 and again just as EOW II was starting up in March 2016. Also in March, with three others, I interviewed about 50 first year EOW students. We worked in small groups, raising questions about first jobs, current employment, aspirations—typical questions adults would ask first year college students. But we also wanted to know what in the course and required field work stood out for them, whether the readings led to seeing work in new ways, and how the course was impacting their thinking about their own careers.

New to the school in 2015, Gatta chose to move to CUNY in large part because her prior non-profit work and several books she had written focused on the experience of low wage workers in the labor market (Gatta, M., 2005, 2014). *Ethnographies of Work* gives her the opportunity to put into practice what she knows about preparing for and getting good jobs. In several talks with her, Gatta confirmed that skills *are* important but networking—having the social capital to ask for help and use connections and knowledge of various workplaces—is critical to the success of low-income job seekers. She is responsible for reworking the EOW syllabus and approach based on what she had learned from the faculty who originated and taught EOW in the years since Guttman’s opening.

Reading and Applying.

The first few sessions of EOW help students grasp the tools of ethnography—basic observing, interviewing, note taking, and the attendant questions about the limits and advantages of participant observation and researcher perspective these activities raise. This focus on technique is critical—it takes students outside their usual way of seeing the world and gives them tools and language for describing what they see outside of the classroom as they practice interviewing and observing. Only a few weeks into the course, students read the first chapter of Sweet and Meiksins, *Changing Contours of Work: Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy*, that addresses the question: what needs to be examined to understand work and its social and economic context today?

From comments in class and during interviews, it was clear that ethnographic methods had given these young people a new way to see the world of work. They applied the ethnographic lens to their current jobs as well as to the occupations they were researching and work sites they were visiting as young ethnographers. The lens helped a number of them make sense of and name power relationships in the workplace. For example, one student observed of the office where she worked that when the owner was away, the next in command always wanted to use his office. He wanted “the perks,” she noted, “the nicer chair, better view, and it made him feel more empowered.”

Interviewer: Has this course changed how you see the workplace?

Student: Before EOW, I just went to work and did what I was supposed to do. Now it's like watching television. You notice everything when you're in the field.

Also early on, students read a feminist ethnographer's study of Las Vegas cocktail waitresses (De Volo, L., 2003). The casino study is intriguing to the young students at Guttman, according to Gatta, not least because among the topics are the waitresses' (perhaps counterintuitive) positive feelings about their revealing uniforms and high heels. The study also introduced the concept of "emotional labor;" students understood immediately that some jobs require that workers modulate or manipulate their feelings to please clients and bosses. They could immediately use the concept to analyze their own living and work situations, the times they were warned to provide cheerful greetings that were counter to their moods and how they were being treated on the job.

Many students' comments were about the restaurant work described in *Gig: Americans Talk about Their Jobs* (Boew, J., Boew, M., and Streeter, S., 2009). Gatta has studied restaurant workers for years, and through her research students began to see that slights and injustices were systemic, not personal. In addition, seeing many of their own restaurant experiences as customers and workers in print validated them. Of the *Gig* chapter on MacDonald's, students said such things as: "That related to me when I read about it. You don't get an easy break and bosses are hard on you." "The client was always right." "I had to mop and wash all the floors and didn't get paid extra."

The readings are challenging, and grow more difficult as the course moves on. The intention is to build a new awareness about the labor market, connect the readings to projects in the field, including service learning that students do, and stimulate an early start on an in depth assignment on a workplace of interest to them (including research, interviews, and observations).

Their early papers indicated that, indeed, students had new ways of seeing the familiar world. And their stated aspirations now included some career areas they had not previously considered. For example, to do their ethnographic research on professions of interest, several students spent time at a professional theatre learning about the range of careers available, while others visited financial institutions, and one found herself first meeting, and then spending time with, the executive director of a major non-profit focused on the problem of homelessness.

The first sessions of EOW described above may not seem dissimilar from a strong first year anthropology or sociology course introducing research methods using "work" as the subject matter. Such courses often send students out to observe and ask them to study familiar environments with fresh eyes. What makes EOW different is that it is the centerpiece of the first year for everyone. That it is required sends a strong signal that the purpose of college is not only to get a diploma but to understand the world of work, and to find a first vocation or calling.

To emphasize this perspective, EOW is aligned with two other intensive required learning activities, the City Seminar and the 1.5 hour a week reflection lab, which also focus on work and career choice. In City Seminar, students also leave their classrooms to visit different neighborhoods, museums, and even grocery stores to conduct their own research, and, in the course of such experiences, begin to place themselves in relation to the vibrancy of the city, to explore the contribution they want to make to the city's economic and social life.

For example, EOW students did a set of "person in the street" interviews in Bryant Park, across the street from Guttman just before Thanksgiving. The question they posed to passers-by was: should stores be open on Thanksgiving? There was no obvious right answer to the conflict of giving workers' the ability to enjoy the holiday (although they would lose a day of pay) with the profit of owners and the wishes of shoppers (also workers who might not have other days to shop). In the context of City Seminar and Ethnographies of Work, students were compelled to ask: if I ran the store what would I do? And, how do my employers set holiday policy?

Developing Knowledge of Careers

Students had just handed in their second "auto ethnography" when we visited in March. This assignment asked students to lay out how they viewed their future education and work. The assignment read in part: "Be sure to explain how the work you completed in EOW I, LABSS and Guttman in the fall semester informed these choices; and how your exploration toward a career is still evolving. And if you have decided on a career how are you planning to attain that career." The writing exercise moved students to think deeply about themselves, their personal characteristics, and specific jobs. They could explain how they had thought and what they were now thinking having read and observed.

Many were aware that they needed to explore further and seemed excited to do so. "At the beginning I had no clue. My work experience was in a restaurant. So why not own a business? Restaurants run in the family. Throughout this semester and in my labs courses and career observations, I did two projects and I looked into business. My 'what's my major' project gave me time to investigate what's out there – what do I like. While I'm still fond of business, I came across IT. And now I work at a cab base. We have computers communicating with taxis. We have a program installed. I also looked into careers in environmental, electrical and broadcast engineering. I would like to get an AA in IT and then transfer."

In a number of cases, however, the students had not yet moved beyond calling an occupation they explored "boring." For example, "boring" was what a student called the nursing home he visited; his conclusion was he'd rather be a heart surgeon but it took too much schooling. This comment and other we heard indicated a worrisome interest in medical and engineering careers without the accompanying knowledge of the foundational math and science requirements for transfer--despite Guttman working hard

to provide such information. We assume students with such aspirations will be helped quickly to enroll in the required prerequisites.

Ethnographies of work and the Guttman environment, more generally, should enhance students' aspirations to feel they can attain corporate or managerial positions if those are of interest. Also they should understand something about the many fascinating careers in the academic and non-profit worlds that don't appear in popular media—what I often tell students are “careers that have no name.” While There may also be a few students at Guttman like the young woman who told us she was interested in “neuroscience and computers, how brain works and how computers work” and wanted to transfer to Barnard, but most don't have such detailed or lofty aspirations. (I learned from her later that one parent is a relatively senior college administrator, so she likely has access to more career information than most.)

Students talk about themselves, their jobs, and the future

Given the long journey many of these students have ahead to develop middle class careers, the interviewing team wanted to know how aware students' were of racial, class, and gender dynamics in the workplace; whether they knew the value of networking; and how important it was to exercise agency in the job search and the workplace. Did they understand that it was not only the future diploma that would leads to a job, but the social capital that college could help them gain through their community research, their work experiences, and the many and varied adults they were meeting?

The term “social capital” had not yet been introduced in EOW although it would be later in the course, so we tried to glean whether in getting their jobs, changing jobs, negotiating with bosses and co-workers, and learning about work, they were beginning to articulate the many intangibles that go with finding satisfying work or enduring oppressive jobs.

While I am cautious about generalizations, the students held some views in common. In March of their first college year, the students had an emergent consciousness of the complexities of the labor market, a great deal of knowledge about oppressive, low-wage work, and the beginnings of a vocabulary to analyze it. The students' comments about working conditions in familiar jobs or occupations were better developed and given expressive language as a result of EOW's readings, discussions, and field work. At the same time they were less articulate on such topics as the role of unions, how career ladders work, or the history of gender discrimination, all of which would come up later.

Working conditions.

Almost all the students we talked with had worked or were working in typical low wage jobs: in restaurants and movie theatres, in offices, schools, retail, in day care and

other social service settings. Some had had subsidized jobs provided by the city—these tended to be working with young children at camps and other youth serving facilities. Almost without exception they disliked bosses, hated being watched over for faults and flaws, and thought that they worked harder than bosses who were paid more.

A number had had the experience of being mistrusted or mistreated, for example, a boss blaming staff if something were missing from the store at the end of the day. One young man who was a ticket taker recalled asking for a stool so he could sit down and being told “no.” The students also saw the disconnect between how hard you worked and what you were paid. A young woman who had worked at a pizza shop had almost no breaks and had to close the shop late at night when she was 16. She and others saw bosses standing around, texting, watching, and not pitching in. In sum, most Guttman students were already cynical about low wage work. They had experienced injustice in the workplace and were aware of privilege (they did not have) that comes with being able to stand up to a boss.

In addition, talking about race in the workplace brought forth buzz and emotion, suggesting an implicit conflict between spending your life trying to combat racism or watching out for yourself and just getting ahead with your network of family and friends. As one very emotional young man said, “Those white people just don’t like us. But you have to keep your feelings in check.” Another recounted telling her mom about an injustice the course had given her tools to describe. Mom said, “Just keep quiet, don’t risk your job,” the young woman told us, but she was not so sure that was the right answer. She was trying to figure out when and how to assert herself. As one of the interviewers perceptively remarked, she was using a sociological perspective and looking for a moral compass.

There were outliers. We heard both realistic and positive stories from the handful of students who had had internships in high school. For example, a student who had years of internships in graphic design through an arts themed high school. Although he liked the field, he had decided that you couldn’t make enough money and you might be replaced (by a robot). Similarly, a second student explained: “I had two internships in high school— one in a defense attorney’s office and a DA office. I worked with data. I sat in on cases. I got to assist in hand picking a jury – it was really cool. I have recommendation letters so when I’m ready to go to law school, I can use them.”

That same student was very clear about race issues in the workplace. In answer to another question, he said, “There are not enough black lawyers in the DA’s office. It’s a prestigious place to work. You have to have certain grades and connections to work there. If you don’t get connections you don’t get the job. You have to start from bottom and work your way up. My supervisor’s last name sounded Black so she had to work as paralegal for two years to work up. She said it would be different if she had a White last name.”

These early experiences reinforce how right Guttman is to make work-based learning and particularly internships a vital aspect of students’ associate’s degrees,

However, the school is still struggling to find enough employers willing to take students in and to provide them with the supervision, mentoring, and pay that is required for a high value experience.

Educators Take Action.

Other colleges and universities, of course, do try to build students' social capital; Guttman is by no means the first. 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 the writing and math lab services, how to ask for help (Karp, Raufman and Ethimiou, 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 education institutions address the issue is to offer short term workshops to 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 settings.

It is for these reasons and others that I am uncomfortable with approaches that teach “soft skills” as if you could learn them like multiplication tables or the rules for division. Whatever the term--professional skills or work skills or life skills-- we should not be teaching such things in isolation from the larger sociological understanding of how these skills work in society, how they are valued, what class and race narratives accompany them, and how the labor market responds to their absence or presence.

My big takeaway, and why I think EOW is so important: EOW solves the problems of building social capital and understanding the world of work in intellectually challenging and respectful ways. It makes learning about work both an academic and experiential endeavor at the center of the curriculum. The usual student activities are fully integrated into and aligned with the central project of the course—learning about work.

Conclusion.

This essay began with several big questions--can deepening students' understanding of the many dimensions of “work” help low income young people take the steps to necessary to securing employment that leads to economic mobility once they have a credential? Can engaging the meaning of work in human lives, the sociology of the professions and the workplace, and the challenges that “being different”—working

class, female, dark skinned, or speaking with an accent—change students’ aspirations, build confidence in using networks, help them internalize and use effectively the requisite “soft skills” employers seek? Armed with analytical tools learned and practiced in college, will they be able advocate for themselves?

The students we interviewed had only been at Guttman seven months, and do not yet use words like “social class,” “mobility,” or “income inequality,” although they had a growing intuitive appreciation for the concepts. Most have not experienced a high wage, white-collar workplace and know little about such places. They were stumped when we asked the difference between a manager and a leader, and not ready to address the fact that if they are successful, as many will be, they may be managers as well as leaders one day.

But they are at the beginning of their college careers, and Guttman is learning and changing with them even as it faces challenges in keeping true to its design. Guttman is working to find employers willing to open their doors to students in the higher paying white collar occupations needed to fulfill the goals of EOW and put its principles even more deeply into practice. More internships are needed for all students to prepare for and seek productive and satisfying work. It takes effort and care to change the aspirations of students and equip them with the skills, knowledge, and social capital they need. Guttman recognizes that the workplace is a powerful site for learning—in fact, a better place to observe and learn soft skills than a classroom.

An example of the magnitude of the task of changing aspirations was poignantly articulated by a student, who, when we asked where she would be in ten years, said, “in a job that at least gives me a 30 minute break.” By the time she graduates, will EOW have equipped her to go forth into the world with a greater purpose, with a passion she can name, with skills, knowledge, and confidence to feel prepared to a really good job? I believe that the answer will be yes—and that Guttman can provide lessons to other higher education institutions committed not only to learning and teaching, but to students’ success throughout their careers.

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