

Making College “Worth It” – Season 2, Episode 5

Attending to Equity in Work-Integrated Learning

Nolan Schultheis (00:05):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:13):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:27):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a second year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:38):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:45):

In this episode, we'll explore new research on work integrated learning.

Jessie Moore (00:49):

Work-integrated learning allows students to obtain work experiences while in college the student and academic mentor and a workplace supervisor collaborate on providing the student an opportunity for purposeful work tasks that enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice relevant to the student's professional development. You also in this episode, might hear us use the abbreviation EDG Equity Deserving Groups. In US Context. We sometimes talk about this as diversity, equity, and inclusion, or a variation of that acronym. So when you hear EDG know that we're talking about the same equity issue in higher education,

Nolan Schultheis (01:29):

We'll talk to Ann Marie Fannon, director of the Work Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo, insomnia Guard, a research assistant in the Work Learn Institute, and an undergraduate psychology student at Waterloo. Let's meet our guests.

Anne-Marie Fannon (01:47):

So thanks so much for having us today. My name is Anne Fannon. I'm the director of what's called the Work Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo. So we are a research and education center that focuses on the role of work integrated learning in developing talent, and in helping to equip our students with the skills that our society needs. I have been working in this space for the past 15 or so years, and I have become incredibly passionate about work integrated learning and the role that it can play for our students for higher ed and for industry and community partners. So I've done a lot of work leading work integrated learning initiatives nationally here in Canada and also developing work integrated learning programs internationally. And I think that's probably the most exciting part is to see

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how well work integrated learning can work in different economies, cultures, contexts. So I'm excited to be here and to share a little bit more about it.

Soumya Garg (02:50):

Hi, I am Soumya. I'm a fourth year honor science student, and am majoring in psychology at University of Waterloo. I'm currently working as a assistant at the Work Learn Institute and this is my second co-op down with them. And for me of how I got familiar with WILL is that before university I researched about work integrated learning and its benefits and I felt that Waterloo had a great will program in place and it would be a great opportunity for me to explore it more. And yeah, I've been in the co-op program since my second year and that's how I really got familiar with that.

Jessie Moore (03:25):

Thank you both. It's fantastic to hear your enthusiasm for work integrated learning and the different perspectives that you're bringing to our conversation today. You've been researching work integrated learning experiences of equity deserving groups. Could you tell us a bit about your research questions and methods?

Anne-Marie Fannon (03:44):

Absolutely. To do so, I think it's important for us to define equity deserving groups because depending on your lens they can look quite different as to who you're including in that definition. So our research focused on the experiences of women racialized peoples two s, lgbtq plus students, people living with disabilities, any intersection of those identities. And we also included international students in our definition of equity deserving groups because we know that many of them do belong to one or more of those equity deserving groups and they also experience significant and different barriers than our domestic students. So just to kind of frame out the experiences of the students that we were exploring with this research, and I think what's important to note is that before we started the research, we noticed a really large gap in the literature. And that was, there wasn't a lot of research that had been done on the experiences of equity deserving groups and none that included student voice that really tried to understand what the barriers were from a student perspective.

(04:59):

We felt it was very important to address this, and that led us to a qualitative approach for our research speaking directly to students who identified as belonging to equity deserving groups to really try and better understand what some of the quantitative data that was out there was already telling us. And so we took a social justice lens to our work and we were really interested in exploring how we might create resources and allocate resources to improve the experiences of all of our students. We reached out to current and former co-op students at the University of Waterloo, asked if they belonged to any of the equity deserving groups that we were studying, and we had 1800 students respond and tell us that they would be willing to have a conversation with us that was gorgeous and exciting, but obviously overwhelming for our qualitative study. So ultimately we ended up speaking to 62 students in two different phases of research. The first phase of the research really focused on understanding the barriers that were experienced by students from equity deserving groups, and that was really helpful for us to dive deep, as I said, into some of the quantitative data that was already demonstrating that students were not having similar experiences. And then the second phase of the research, which Samya helped

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with and is super exciting to me, was having students from equity deserving groups interview a second group of students to start to identify solutions to these barriers.

Soumya Garg (06:40):

So as Anne said, I was able to take part in this second phase of this study and I was able to conduct a few interviews with our participants and we were all trained in trauma-informed qualitative approach, which basically means that we make sure that we don't reinduce the trauma while we are asking those questions. We made sure that the questions are open-ended and participants feel comfortable sharing as little or as much as they want to. And as a member of the EDG community myself, while I was analyzing the data, I was able to bring a student perspective, an EDG perspective. So that was great.

Jessie Moore (07:19):

I love the thoughtfulness and care with which you've approached the design of this study and your attentiveness to student and to use not only among your participants but also among your research team. So that's really, really cool. We definitely want to get to some of those solutions in a moment. But first I think it's important for us to know a little bit about the barriers that you identified. So what kinds of barriers do equity to serving groups and counter in work integrated learning?

Soumya Garg (07:50):

So I can take this one. I can start us off. So in our study we looked at two types of barriers that students from diverse backgrounds encountered while they take a part in these work placements. And these placements are competitive, meaning that students have to apply for jobs and it's similar to applying for a regular job. So the first barriers we were able to analyze were non-structural barriers. So these are often invisible, but they strongly impact students. For example, many feel the pressure to hide their identities or who they are, example their race, disability, or gender because they are worried about being judged or treated differently. For example, women in stem, they often feel the need to sort of downplay their gender in order to avoid any bias. And over time some students start to accept these biases as quote normal, which leads them to have a lesser meaningful experience and fully engage in the whole work placement. And the second type of barriers we were able to identify were structural barriers, and these are more to do with the rules and regulations which are set by organizations or programs that can conflict with the students' needs. These include things like unclear guidance on getting accommodations facing discrimination or microaggression challenges with working in person versus remotely and even barriers related to program fees or immigration status.

Anne-Marie Fannon (09:22):

I'll add on just a couple of the significant themes that we pulled out from the findings and the barriers. So one of the first ones was information gaps. So our students identified that they really had challenges navigating the different structures and processes. Who was responsible for providing an accommodation? Does that support come from the higher education institution? Does it come from the employer? If it comes from the employer, do they speak to their boss? Do they speak to hr? So kind of that newcomer to the systems of higher ed and employment and trying to figure out how to get the information that they need to have agency and to get the support that they're looking for in their work integrated learning experience. The second major barrier was a lack of training on the part of the staff from the higher education institution that we're supporting them.

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(10:19):

And sometimes it was a frustration with an awareness that staff had general inclusivity training but not lived experience similar to theirs or that they couldn't understand the specific challenge that the student was facing. Similarly, we saw a barrier with a lack of training or awareness with some of the employer organizations that the students were working with. So either an employer not understanding cultural safety, not understanding some of the accommodations that might need to be made as a result of that student's identity or just not having in place strong practices and policies to support equity deserving groups. And then the last piece was probably I would define as a power dynamic struggle. So oftentimes students felt as though they didn't have power in the situation that the employer's perspective would be valued over the student's perspective and that it would difficult to find ways to have their concerns and the challenges they were facing heard by the higher education institution.

Jessie Moore (11:31):

It's really helpful to have that overview of the barriers that you identified. And I also know that you and colleagues have published an article on that part of the study, and so we will link to that in the episode notes so that others can read it. It's a rich article and part of what prompted our invitation to you all, so we're glad that you were able to offer a quick overview and then there's a lot of richness in that article for those who want to learn more as well.

Nolan Schultheis (11:59):

Sure. I did just briefly want to say I heard a point that Soumya had made, and I thought it actually had stuck out to me whenever I had read the overview. And that was the omission of identity. And it was interesting to read about because even I as a white male have omitted parts of my identity before in social groups and not really considered really the severity of it because it was so low stakes. And now after reading about the equity deserving groups, it seems they're having to omit is far more high stakes and far more anxiety provoking. And it was interesting to think about that because I've never really worried about having to omit something. I've just kind of assumed like, oh, okay, I probably wouldn't be smart to say that and moved on. And that was the extent of what was at stake really is what I'm trying to get at.

Soumya Garg (12:59):

Yeah, I think it's super interesting to see how I think everybody hides parts of their identity. Who we are at home is not who we are at work. And it's very interesting to see how when you start hiding parts of yourself, which you're not able to engage in the experiences fully, you have to start hiding parts, which better you, which do not push you towards success. And I think that's when it really starts to get problematic, and that's when we really need to look into it and provoke these conversations and start talking about it.

Nolan Schultheis (13:33):

So the next question is what steps can businesses and other work integrated learning sites take in order to foster more inclusive environments for WIL students?

Anne-Marie Fannon (13:45):

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It is such a good question, and we'll probably end up touching on some of the self-censorship masking elements with this question as well. I should note that Soya is also writing a paper on that. So we will hopefully have another publication coming out soon. But my advice to businesses or other work sites for work integrated learning students would be first and foremost to recognize that students from equity deserving groups are going to face all of the same barriers as equity deserving employees, but that they have even less information on how to succeed in the world of work and how to navigate organizational structures. So it's kind of that double challenge. They do face microaggressions, they do feel the need to often hide their identity, but they're also doing so in a completely new and novel context. And so the first piece of advice is to be explicit and consistent and regular in communication about a desire to support inclusivity and to highlight the structures and the programs that they have in place.

(14:57):

So just to give you a really specific example, we see a lot of this with recruitment. As Soumya mentioned, our students apply for job postings and they read that job posting and oftentimes our employers have really strong programs to support students from equity deserving groups, and they say nothing about it in the job description, and the student looks at it and says, I don't know if this is a safe place for me. I'm not going to apply for that position. So they're out of opportunities because the employers haven't thought, oh, it's really important for us to convey our desire to bring in diverse employees and all of the cool things that we've put in place to support them. And then it goes to the next level, the interview, what kinds of accommodations can you put in place to be inclusive in your interviewing? Have you thought about doing the same kind of inclusivity inclusive structures for interviews as you do for full-time employees?

(15:54):

So thinking about bringing that parallel in. And then the next is orientation, being very, very explicit to students about here are the employee resource groups that we have. Here's our accommodation process, here's the kind of flexibility you can have in your job. Here are the ways that you can structure your work and you have agency and saying that at the beginning of the orientation and two weeks later and one month later, because students may just be developing comfort with the workplace and then wanting to disclose and then wanting to share more of who they are. So to kind of remember that all the things we need to do to be inclusive as employers, we need to do for students, but we just need to be more explicit and to speak more regularly about these kinds of things. And the last would be, again, the need for all of us to undertake training, to understand implicit bias, to do what we can, to understand how students from different identities are going to intersect with ourselves and our work and our organizations. So those would be the key pieces of advice that I have. I don't know if you have anything to add, Sonia?

Soumya Garg (17:12):

I think those sound great. Yeah,

Nolan Schultheis (17:14):

So it's kind of funny that you'd use the word advice because my next question is what advice would you give to students who are listening to the podcast and who are interested in or currently pursuing work integrated learning?

Soumya Garg (17:26):

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So I definitely recommend pursuing work integrated learning because it's been an invaluable experience to me. It's given me a chance to apply what I've learned in my classes into the real world and build connections that can help me shape my career. But I do believe that at the same time, there are a few things that anybody who's considering applying to well or well should keep in mind. Number one, be proactive. I think you shouldn't be afraid to ask questions and seek out support. Work placements can sometimes be a little overwhelming for me, a lot overwhelming, but especially if you're adjusting to a new environment and it's okay to need guidance and important to use the resources which are available to you. Secondly, know your worth. It's common to feel imposter syndrome, especially in competitive roles, but you need to trust what you bring to the table, and you shouldn't be afraid to let your unique experiences and perspectives shine.

(18:30):

For example, in this role, me being a part of the EDG community really helped me inform my analysis in the second part of our EDE phase. So that's something I was able to bring to the table additionally, instead of hiding that part of myself and finally make the most of every opportunity to network, to learn to grow, the skills and connections which you can gain can have a lasting impact on anyone's career journey. And then I do have my few own personal experiences of co-op. Would you like me to share that or are these suggestions enough?

Jessie Moore (19:06):

We'd love to hear your experience as well.

Soumya Garg (19:09):

Yeah, sure. So from a first co-op, I worked as a recreational therapy assistant where I supported adults with mental disabilities. And through this role, I was able to apply what I'd learned in my psychology courses about various mental disorders, and I learned how to engage clients in meaningful activities. I was able to communicate, change my communication style based on who I was communicating with and their personal needs. And more importantly, I gained firsthand experience in creating a supportive therapeutic environment. And this experience really deepened my understanding of mental health, and it showed me the real world impact of whatever I had learned in my courses because sometimes they can feel so theoretical. And from a second and third co-op, I had been working as a research assistant at the Workland Institute, and I promise, I'm not saying it just because Ann is here, but it's been a transformational experience.

(20:07):

I came in with some basic research and data analysis skills, but from there I was able to build on so much more and I had no idea that I honestly would learn so much and I would come so far in my journey. And more than that, more than the technical skills I've gained, I've sort of seen my perspective towards research change. When I started my co-op, I was still debating whether research is my cup of tea, but I definitely consider it now. And I feel like more than anything, I'm growing passionate about it every day and conversations, honestly, conversations like these make me just remind me how impactful our work can be. And it's exciting to feel that I'm contributing to something meaningful and I honestly can't imagine doing something else right now. And all of this I've gained through by being in the Will program. So I'd recommend it more than anything if anybody's considering to join the Will program.

Jessie Moore (21:06):

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Soumya, I love hearing about your experience, and it really sounds like the best commercial for work integrated learning possible, not only for students, but also for faculty and staff who are trying to think about how they might make space for it in curricular structures. So thank you for sharing that. It's really rich and meaningful to hear that it was such a beneficial experience and continues to be a beneficial experience for you. I'm curious, Anne, from your perspective, and Soumya, you can jump in on this as well, what would you recommend that universities and their faculty and staff do to improve access to high quality work integrated learning?

Anne-Marie Fannon (21:47):

Exactly, exactly. I think one of the key things for higher education institutions to think about is to really understand the spectrum of work integrated learning. You just mentioned at Jessie, what can we do in curricular structures? How can we make space for work integrated learning? And I think we need to understand that providing our students a menu of ways to engage in work integrated learning is one of the keys to access. I adore co-op education. I think it's a brilliant model of work integrated learning, and it's not for every student. And so we really do want to think about program design, where we're scaffolding work integrated learning, and we're providing lots of different entry points so that students can find the form of work integrated learning that is most suited for them and for where they are in their learning journey. And then the second piece is really, this falls a bit into the solution space for the EDG barriers. We are learning as higher education institutions what kind of specialized supports we need to put in place for students from equity deserving groups, and that is a space in place of growth and work integrated learning as well. How do we create student advisor roles, liaison roles between the higher ed and industry to really give those students from equity deserving groups the reflection of their experience, the authentic reflection, recognition of the challenges and the barriers and specialized supports. So again, I think we're all learning how to do that work.

Jessie Moore (23:25):

Thank you so much. I agree it's an area that we're still learning on, but you've given us some rich ideas to work with and I appreciate that.

Nolan Schultheis (23:34):

What areas of work integrated learning still need to grow in order for more students to feel comfortable participating in it?

Anne-Marie Fannon (23:40):

I think the specialized supports that I just referenced is one of those areas, and I'll take it one step further. We need as higher education institutions to think about the supports that we can provide to our employers and host organizations. Some of them are large multinational companies, they've got gorgeous programs, and we really just have to do things like remind them, oh, by the way, let your students participate. Make sure your students are full members of your organization and give them access to these resources. But oftentimes we're working with small to medium enterprises who don't have those internal resources to support equity deserving students because sometimes a co-op employer is an organization that literally becomes an employer by bringing a student in. It's a solo enterprise or a very, very small organization. And so we as higher education institutions can do a lot to support those employers in their journeys of learning about equity, diversity, and inclusion. And so that can be everything from here's best practices in writing a job description. Did you know that you can be

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an inclusive interviewer by considering these five easy steps and that kind of thing, creating resources and then making sure we have staff that are available to support the employers and the students while the will experiences are happening. I think those are really critical areas of growth for inclusive work integrated learning.

Jessie Moore (25:13):

That's fantastic. Anything that you would like to add? I really appreciate the richness of your responses. There's so much to think through and act on and what you're sharing and that very helpful for all of us. So thank you.

Nolan Schultheis (25:30):

So I know Jessie had mentioned that I interviewed with WIL groups in the past, and this question was one that they enjoyed a lot, so we had to recycle it, and that was what separates a great WIL experience from a good WIL experience.

Soumya Garg (25:47):

Yeah, I would be more than happy to take this one. I think a great will experience is much more than just checking off a task list or just learning the basics. I think in a good placement, you can pick up a few skills, get familiar with tasks, but in a truly great experience, you feel like you're actually growing and getting a clearer picture of what your future cardio or potential cardio could look like. For example, for me, what made the difference was having mentors who genuinely cared about my development, they made me feel like I was part of something bigger, which made the work I did much more meaningful. And as Anne always says, if you want it, ask for it. And she's always encouraged me to put what I want to learn forward and helped me with whatever she can. So that really helped me develop my skills.

(26:42):

And I believe that when a project aligns with your interests, it's exciting. You feel like you're making a real impact and not just going through the motions of the daily nine to five, and if anything, getting paid is a huge plus. It shows that your work is valued and it allows you to really focus. And so for me, a great well experience is the one that sticks with you. It's not just something that you put on your resume, but something which truly helps you shape your skills and perspective and helps you figure out the next steps and it leaves a lasting impact on you.

Anne-Marie Fannon (27:18):

It's very hard for me to top that and I can bring in some theoretical perspectives and some models. I think Soumya said it very, very well. We certainly have done some analysis and some studies on this, and we consider actually without any prompting or connection on this specific question that there's kind of these key aspects that this student is learning and growing, that they feel as though they're having impact. And that really in my mind, comes to including the student as an authentic member of the organization and helping them see the larger picture of the work that they're doing. Sometimes students don't get the most glamorous work in the world, and so really a mentor that does help them see the bigger picture, relevance is critical. And I think what's gorgeous and fascinating about work integrated learning is sometimes the relevance is prescribed and in place.

(28:21):

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So a student kinesiology student is working in a kinesiology office for their co-op work term. We can connect the dots very easily, but soya also laid out very nicely for us how relevance can grow and change for a student. So this is one of the things I love about work integrated learning. You can have an accounting student go and work in an accounting firm and say, wow, that is not what I want to do with my career. I would like to look at different disciplines and I'm thinking about changing my major. And then you can also have a student go into a work integrated learning experience and find a passion, find relevance, say, oh, this is something I'd never considered before and now I'm interested in taking a class on it. And so that's just one of the most gorgeous pieces of the work integrated learning equation is the testing, the testing of different environments, the testing of different careers, and really finding that fit and finding your passion. And then last but not least, the key ingredient for work integrated learning that we speak to is networking. And that is networking as we think about it properly, like building your network and meeting new people, but really becoming part of that organization that you're working with, establishing those relationships, feeling like a member of the team. And I think maybe appropriately for our conversation and equity deserving groups, feeling like you can be your authentic self in that organization, which is really key to building those relationships.

Jessie Moore (29:52):

I love how your responses in combination demonstrate that your office is both studying and enacting great will. So that's exciting to see too. And just I appreciate the authenticity that you bring to this conversation. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your research?

Anne-Marie Fannon (30:12):

Oh, that's such a good question, Jessie. I think I would say that we feel very privileged at work, learn to have space to study the role of work integrated learning. We try to identify research topics that are really going to speak to critical issues from the perspective of all of the participants of work integrated learning. So I think the EDG study is a good example of how we really tried to identify a gap and to think about who needed to be a part of our research team to authentically do that work. And we do the same thing. So whether that's partnering with employers to better understand their challenges and perspectives or working with other higher education institutions so that we're not coming solely from a Waterloo perspective, I think that that's probably key to being successful in this work and to being able to explore all sorts of fun, curiosities and critical questions.

Jessie Moore (31:15):

Thank you so much. We really have enjoyed this conversation today and appreciate you sharing your work with our listeners. And Nolan, any last thoughts before we wrap up?

Nolan Schultheis (31:25):

Yeah, sure. I was just going to say, it seems like this is very, WS in general are very, very focused on intentionality and kind of community. And I can definitely see the parallel between intentionality and community and then specifically the subcategory of edg s. And I think it's interesting how the synthesis kind of almost writes itself in that it almost seems counterintuitive to not be including more diverse cultures in the workforce, especially if there's been research and living proof of mixing and the business either getting better social relations within the office or even more profits or just working better in general.

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Anne-Marie Fannon (32:12):

Oh, so you just prompted something for me, Nolan, can I jump in and extend our conversation for a second?

Jessie Moore (32:18):

Please do.

Anne-Marie Fannon (32:19):

So this is why I get really, really excited about this work for equity deserving students because we do have supports and structures in place with higher education institutions. And if we can figure out how to do work integrated learning more inclusively, we can set students from equity deserving groups up for success in a way many of them struggle with right now. So there are some studies that show that students from equity deserving groups that participate in co-op are able to reduce or eliminate the traditional post-graduation salary gap that would exist for them. If you think about things like students from a neurodivergent population, they often struggle with underemployment and unemployment throughout their careers. And yet there's also research that shows if a student is comfortable disclosing in a will experience than they're more comfortable disclosing and seeking the accommodation that they need moving forward. So this is really, really important work for us. And I think as higher education institutions, we can make significant social impact by making sure that students have positive work integrated learning experiences while they have that support structure around them.

Jessie Moore (33:34):

Anne and Soumya, your work emphasizes that this is not the responsibility of the individual students, it's the responsibility of our higher education institutions and our work integrated learning partners. And there are both the barriers that you talked about, but they're not the student's responsibility. They're our responsibility to take on and dismantle. And part of that may be giving students new strategies that your research certainly opens up and samia your response on tips for students was just rich and powerful. But again, it's our responsibility to work through these barriers and to make sure that the experiences are more equitable for all of our students. Thank you so much for joining us and we'll catch up with you soon. So what stood out to you as we were talking about work integrated learning in this episode?

Nolan Schultheis (34:37):

I think the biggest thing that stood out to me is really just that these problems a majority of us have isn't exclusive to ourselves, and more often than not, there are people out there that are willing to help. And it seems like through work integrated learning, there's a lot of intentionality and a lot of community building, and I think that helps perfectly whenever you're also factoring into looking at it through a lens of an EDG where inclusivity and feeling welcomed are so important to academic performance and success.

Jessie Moore (35:11):

I also appreciate the reminder that many businesses and workplace sites are already doing some of these inclusivity and equitable practices for their continuing employees. And so the reminder to extend those opportunities to their work integrated learning participants is really important as well. But I also

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really appreciated the thoughtfulness of the tips for students and really owning your identity and owning your worth. I think that it's easy when we're working in a new site and with new people to have some imposter syndrome, as was mentioned. But knowing your worth allows you to work through that imposter syndrome and make really valuable contributions to the work integrated learning workplace and also to learn more from the experience as well. I look forward to the continuing research coming out of the Work Learn Institute at Waterloo, and we will be sure to share additional resources from them as they're available on the episode page and other parts of our website. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (36:24):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (36:30):

To learn more about work integrated learning, see our show notes at www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.