

60-Second SoTL

Episode 78 – First-Generation Students’ Workviews

Featured Article

Kampen Robinson, Christine, Neil Baird, Mariko Izumi, and Tim Diette. 2026. “What Does ‘Work’ Mean to First-Generation Students? Emerging Identities in WIL Narratives.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 14: 1–17.

<https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.14.12>

Transcript

(Music)

0:10

Jessie L. Moore:

What does “work” really mean to first-generation college students—and how might those meanings shape their experiences in work-integrated learning? That’s the focus of this week’s 60-second SoTL from Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning. I’m Jessie Moore.

(Music)

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In “What Does ‘Work’ Mean to First-Generation Students? Emerging Identities in WIL Narratives,” Christine Kampen Robinson, Neil Baird, Mariko Izumi, and Tim Diette explore how students define work—and how those definitions are shaped by identity, experience, and culture. Their article appears in a work-integrated learning special section in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, an open-access journal.

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The study was conducted across four institutions in the United States and Canada, with data gathered through surveys that adapted the “workview” activity from the Life Design Lab at Stanford University. The researchers asked student to write a short “workview,” reflecting on: Why do you work? What is work for? What does work mean? And What defines good or worthwhile work?

The researchers collected 51 of these narratives—40 from first-generation students—and used an iterative, collaborative coding process to analyze them. Through multiple rounds of team-based and individual coding, they developed a refined codebook of 14 cultural scripts present in the students’ workviews.

1:40

Five cultural scripts appeared most frequently: work as necessity, work as a transaction, work for self-fulfillment, work's community or societal impact, and work as self-improvement.

But what's especially compelling is how these scripts differed across student groups.

First-generation students often described work as deeply relational and collective—tied to supporting family, serving community, and navigating systemic barriers. Their narratives frequently reflected an awareness of issues like race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and how those factors shape access to safe and meaningful work.

In contrast, continuing-generation students were more likely to frame work in individual terms—focusing on personal exchange, individual fulfillment, and personal financial needs.

2:30

Even more importantly, students didn't simply adopt these cultural scripts—they negotiated them. Many narratives revealed tension, with students both affiliating with and resisting dominant ideas about work. For example, a student might describe work as necessary for survival, while also pushing back against the idea that work should define their identity or limit their well-being.

These moments of tension highlight work-integrated learning as a powerful site of identity development—what Baxter Magolda describes as self-authorship—where students actively make meaning of who they are and who they are becoming.

3:06

So what does this mean for practice?

The authors argue that we need to move beyond treating workplace norms as neutral or universal. Instead, they call for making cultural scripts visible—through reflection, dialogue, and mentoring—so students can better understand both their own assumptions and those embedded in workplace contexts.

They also encourage educators to recognize the strengths first-generation students bring, including strong community orientation, resilience, and community cultural wealth.

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Ultimately, this study reminds us that “work” is not a fixed concept—it's a negotiated one. And if we want work-integrated learning to be equitable and meaningful, we need to start by listening carefully to how students themselves define it.

To learn more about this study, visit our show notes for a link to the open access article.

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(Music)

4:03

Jessie Moore:

Join us for our next episode of 60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning. Learn more about the Center at www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org.

(Music)