A majority of students work while in college, and academic libraries employ students in large numbers and are dependent on their labor—a dependency that only deepens in a higher education climate of shrinking budgets and scarcity rhetoric. Given that the students we employ are the same students whom academic libraries exist to support, we have an ethical and educational obligation to ensure that their time with us is as useful to them as possible—at the very least that it not interfere with their academic work, but ideally that it integrate work and learning in ways that actively contribute to their intellectual development. Due to the time we spend with them, we are in a better position to support the needs of the students we employ than those we encounter at service desks, in research consultations, in one-shot instruction, or even in for-credit classes. Identifying student employment as educationally purposeful—as experiential learning (EL), or as a high-impact practice (HIP) with the same characteristics as other HIPs such as internships, capstone projects, or first-year seminars—meets that obligation to align work with learning and support students’ academic success. But for this learning experience to be useful, effective, or transformative, it also needs to be accessible, equitable, and good—rigorously designed and intentionally implemented so as not to become the second-class HIP that suffices for working students who can’t study abroad.

Practicing student employment as EL or as a HIP presents a tangle of challenges for pursuing genuinely learner- and learning-centered approaches, and for providing equitable work-learning opportunities that don’t simply perpetuate existing educational and socioeconomic disparities. There is a fundamental equity problem in adding a glossy narrative of educational value to the fact that students provide contingent, low-wage labor for the very institutions they are accruing debt to attend. And that exploitative dynamic only becomes more unpalatable as academic libraries instrumentalize the purported educational benefits of student labor to demonstrate the library’s value to campus administration. An equitable and learner-centered approach to student employment necessitates honest recognition of the context in which academic libraries are pursuing student employment as an engaged learning experience. It requires being willing to practice student employment as equitably as we can within existing conditions and parameters, to be real with students about the structural problems that nevertheless persist, and to consistently check that we’re centering students rather than just leveraging them for the library’s gain.

Despite the tensions and challenges inherent in developing library student employment as an equitable and learner-centered educational practice, however, it does repre-
sent a significant opportunity to support students’ development not just as current and future employees, but as reflective thinkers with the capacity to both look critically at the way things are and imagine them otherwise. As Brian Pusser notes, student employment is “a site of contest between the reproduction of norms of the workplace and higher education as a site for emancipatory student intellectual work.”¹ That contest is perhaps exemplified by the fact that the book A Good Job: Campus Employment as a High-Impact Practice invokes Paulo Freire and the need for student-centered pedagogy, but also has in its chapter on student learning a section titled “What Employers Want,” based on the competencies identified in the annual National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey report.² The friction between the values that inhere in Freirean pedagogy and NACE competencies—between being able to question and transform the status quo and measuring up to corporate norms—points to an acute equity-oriented issue in how to frame the purpose of student employment as an educative practice. But it also suggests that the very elements of employment that appear to be in tension with the practices and aims of active, learner-focused, anti-hierarchical pedagogies actually provide highly contextual and applied opportunities to reflect critically on inequitable structures of work and learning. Navigating between Freire and NACE, libraries must carefully evaluate how to articulate the aims and learning outcomes of student employment; how to manage the basic logistical processes of student employment; and how to reconceive roles, responsibilities, relationships, and hierarchies within our organizations around student employment.³

HIRING AND WORKPLACE CLIMATE

In their argument against higher education’s vocational turn and its market-based focus on reductive ideas around job skills and graduate employability, Matthew T. Hora and his student co-authors suggest that “the most important step that higher education can take in demonstrating its commitment to the well-being of its students is to embody principles of cultural competence and fair labor practices.”⁴ But as Rosan Mitola, Erin Rinto, and Emily Pattni’s survey of the literature on library student employment as a high-impact practice reveals, there has been little attention paid to equity and diversity in hiring and managing student employees—we aren’t scrutinizing our own workplace practices and cultural competence when it comes to thinking about student employment as a learning experience.⁵ High-impact practices appear to be particularly beneficial for minoritized students, but those students—particularly Black students, Latina/o/x students, and first generation and transfer students—participate in HIPs in lower numbers.⁶ Intentionally designing library student employment as a HIP would therefore appear to have promise as a means of lessening the tension between needing a paycheck and participating in an enhanced educational opportunity for students who have historically had least access to them.

That promise, however, is dependent on an equitable hiring process for library student positions—a process which is often more decentralized and less subject to oversight than hiring processes for non-student staff. Hiring processes for student employees should also be standardized across the library—from position descriptions and job postings through interviewing and on-boarding—in order to ensure a consistent and intentional approach to hiring for equity and diversity. As with hiring for full-time or non-student library staff, we need to consider where we are publicizing available positions, and to reach out to campus offices and student organizations to develop communication networks that reach minoritized students. And we should involve current student staff in the hiring process for numerous reasons of both equity and learner-centeredness, from recognizing students as experts in the positions for which we’re hiring, to broadening and diversifying the range of staff who determine who works for the library.

We can also look at the application materials we ask students to provide and revise our requirements in recognition of the fact that students “educated outside of privileged systems of education do not learn to compete-speak” in the “right” ways.⁷ Job application materials and job interviews provide an opportunity to avoid another moment in higher education in which people are sorted purportedly by merit, but in practice by a process characterized by “competition, hoop-jumping, ass-kissing, and proof of belonging” that inevitably rewards the already privileged.⁸ An equitable approach to library student employment requires that we design application processes that deliberately seek to reduce barriers built on the assumption that applicants possess certain kinds of social capital. That might include providing options other than writing a formal cover letter and resume, and
finding ways to recognize the value of the kinds of knowledge and experience that don't typically warrant a place on standard resumes. We can provide applicants with interview questions ahead of time, and conduct interviews in ways that center the experience of the applicant, making it a meaningful learning opportunity even for those students who don't get the job. And we can avoid the temptation of using Federal Work-Study awards as a proxy for equitable hiring or hiring for diversity, given the inequities and limitations of that program itself.\(^9\)

However, an equitable hiring process is not, of course, sufficient—as Jaena Alabi has argued in terms of the diversity of librarianship, academic libraries need to focus not just on hiring processes but also on work climate and retention.\(^10\) Similarly, for student employment in libraries to be both equitable and effective as a learning experience, we have to retain the students we hire and ensure they have a supportive, affirming, and inclusive work and learning environment for the duration of their employment. Many Black and Indigenous librarians and librarians of color do not experience such an environment while working in academic libraries, and it’s not the environment experienced on campus or in the classroom by many underrepresented students.\(^11\) While academic libraries have attended to the experience of marginalized students as library users and in information literacy classrooms, we also need to consider their experience as student employees: it seems reasonable to extrapolate that library student employees are not exempt from the systemic and pervasive harms experienced by minoritized students on campus in general, and by minoritized staff in our organizations specifically. We cannot make claims for library student employment as a positive learning experience if we are not paying attention to the work environment in which that learning is supposed to occur—which is also, of course, the environment in which student employees’ supervisors and other staff are also working and learning. Workplace climate is one of the many ways in which thinking about student employment from both a learner-centered and an equity perspective requires thinking about equity in our organizations at large.

**PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH**

Beyond the details of who we're hiring and the work-learning environment we provide them, we also need to consider which students within our organizations work in positions designed from a learning perspective, in order to avoid creating two-tiered systems of library student employment whereby only certain student work is considered engaged learning. In the words of Matt Brim, “When we’re choosy about whom we teach, we limit learning.”\(^12\) Thus far, however, published details of library student employment framed explicitly as a HIP, experiential learning, or some other form of engaged experience aimed at deeper learning often focus on experiences with limited participation: limited to the singular positions of just one or two student employees, to peer research or reference advisors, to students in specific library units, to graduate students, or to students able to participate in an unpaid internship.\(^13\) Internships, as a high-impact practice adjacent to student employment, provide a useful point of comparison. Research shows an absence of equitable access to and participation in internships, and suggests that these barriers may actually exacerbate disparities in educational and employment outcomes.\(^14\) It’s certainly the case, as H. Bussell and J. Hagman note, that taking experiential learning practices to scale requires time and resources, and “will inherently be less efficient” than traditional models of student training and employment, but as David James Hudson points out, it’s hard to do the messy work of challenging foundational assumptions if our “environment is governed by expectations of efficiency.”\(^15\) Limiting access to student employment as a learning opportunity is consequential, as the example of internships demonstrates: it reduces student employment’s potential to make participation in high-impact practices more accessible, introduces another layer of hierarchy and differentiation into the employment structure of academic libraries, fails to discern the ways in which engaged learning and reflection can be a part of all student positions, and risks further amplifying existing disparities.

An equitable approach to student employment as learning therefore means a programmatic approach, encompassing not just some but all student employees. It requires re-evaluating student positions that are—or are perceived as being—low- or no-skill, as rote or mechanical, and therefore as unassimilable to a learning framework. Firstly, even those allegedly low-skill jobs require skills and training, and are areas in which students build expertise through experience. Not acknowledging those skills or that experience is one of the means by which student staff, like non-librarian staff and certain types of work in the academic library, are consistently
overlooked, under-valued, and marginalized. Secondly, however, if we consider student employment to be a potentially impactful, transformative, and learner-centered experience, we shouldn’t have student positions that consist entirely of what we consider to be repetitive or mechanical work without any deep learning value. An equitable and programmatic approach to library student employment entails all student jobs having a detailed position description that considers the learner’s experience and identifies how the role will support their academic and professional development. Students in all positions should similarly, at the very least, have regular, structured opportunities to reflect on their work and its connection to their academic and professional goals, and to have constructive, supportive conversations with supervisors about their work and learning.

These components can be incorporated into all student positions, but to make those positions yet more learner-centered, however, we can also build in space and opportunity for students themselves to determine the shape and scope of their role. Which isn’t to say that students should be expected or required to do work beyond their regular duties, but rather to allow them some agency and autonomy in what their work looks like and how they do it. That autonomy might include the scope to revise workflows or reimagine core tasks and responsibilities, or to initiate or participate in project-based rather than just task-based work. Learner-centered student positions would thus be able to evolve over the course of the relationship between student and library, and not be designed only on the basis of the library’s labor needs or the library’s perception of what students should be learning.

LEARNER-CENTERED SUPERVISION

But it’s not just student roles that need reevaluating in terms of equity and learner-centeredness. In a model where student employment is an intentional learning experience, the principal facilitators of student learning are work supervisors. The very term “supervisor” is laden with values and meanings antithetical to learner-centered and critical pedagogies. Per the dictionary definition, a supervisor is “in charge of an employee,” “directs” people and tasks, and, in the literal meaning of the word, “oversees” work, workers, or departments. As a term tied to top-down authority, hierarchy, and the maintenance of compliance and productivity, it erases the agency and autonomy of those who are supervised. As Kayo Denda and Jennifer Hunter note, this hierarchical model of supervision operates to the detriment of the learning of both student and supervisor, and is at odds with learner-centered and justice-oriented pedagogies that reject hierarchical relationships between student and teacher in favor of thinking of students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.” While contemporary understandings of supervision, in the library and elsewhere, might place more emphasis on mentoring and coaching, thinking of student employment as an educational practice that foregrounds learners and equity requires that we consider what constitutes learner-centered supervision, and how to bring to bear pedagogies that recognize students’ knowledge and are responsive to their cultural practices and material realities in the context of supervisory relationships.

Librarians have considered the application of universal design for learning, culturally sustaining pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and trauma informed approaches to various modes of instruction and to the reference and other work performed at service desks. But many of the structural components of student employment would appear to be at odds with such reflective and critical practices: hiring, firing, job training, assigning work tasks, and reviewing work performance often happen within a fairly static set of authority relationships, and are connected by an assumption that student employees should assimilate to the values and culture of the library. A facilitative, learner-centered approach to supervision, that adheres to pedagogical practices rooted in a concern for equity, will necessarily entail recognizing that supervisors almost always have more power in any given situation. Nevertheless, it also involves making a commitment to student employees as collaborators and co-learners, and practicing what we might term supervisory humility—acknowledging, in Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s words, that “in any given exchange I likely have less to teach than I have to learn,” and that it’s not necessarily the supervisor who always has the relevant knowledge or skill.

Aligning learner-centered supervision and equity-focused pedagogies might also require relinquishing what bell hooks refers to in a classroom context as “rituals of control”: having students design and write their own performance reviews (taking cues perhaps from the practice of “ungrading”), for example, or co-create policies
and procedures, including around the conditions of their own employment. We can choose to respond to what we perceive as poor performance not with disciplinary measures, but from a place of care and curiosity, asking first what might be happening in a student’s life that's having an impact on work, or what it is about their work situation that might be affecting their performance. In the context of student employment as engaged learning, supervisory position descriptions, supervisor performance review, and the language in which we talk about supervision—perhaps even the term itself—need to change, alongside the practice of supervision. It isn't sufficient to say that supervisors are educators; we also need to think about what types of educators they are, and how they educate.

LIBRARY HIERARCHIES AND ROLES

Conceiving of supervisors as educators, as facilitators of student learning and participants in multidirectional, cross-hierarchy learning relationships, also means examining their role in the organization—anther way in which student employment as learning requires us to consider equity, inclusion, and stratification in our organizations at large. Some student employees are supervised by staff with the title “librarian,” who may or may not have instructional responsibilities. But many student employees are supervised by non-librarian staff with no formal instructional responsibilities. Those supervisors are already teaching and mentoring in myriad, often unacknowledged, ways; participation in teaching and learning is therefore already distributed throughout library organizations, rather than being the purview of a single group of staff, and formalizing student employment as educationally purposeful only underscores that fact. However, while participation and expertise in the work of teaching and learning is distributed throughout the library, respect, status, and remuneration for that work are not distributed in the same way. And there is the potential, as Jill Markgraf points out, for there to be multilayered resistance to the very idea of supervisors as educators, both from faculty and from supervisors themselves. To focus on equity in how we pursue student employment as a high-impact or experiential learning opportunity means recognizing that issues of equity for student staff are not separable from issues of equity for other library staff, and that supervisors are learners too. An equitable, learner-centered approach to student employment has to encompass recognition, support, training, and development for supervisors as facilitators of learning.

And it has to encompass honest conversations about how labor is distributed, valued, and rewarded in academic libraries. Supervising student employees is only a fraction of most supervisors’ responsibilities, and formally adding educational work and facilitation of student-centered learning to those responsibilities participates in a trend of shifting labor down the library hierarchy without a commensurate increase in compensation or a reduction in other workloads. Shifting or expanding work and responsibilities down the academic library hierarchy means shifting them from the least diverse strata of staff—librarians—to more diverse and lower paid non-librarian staff. And this dynamic, of course, encompasses student staff too, particularly those in roles that readily lend themselves to a high-impact framework, such as research consultants or peer tutors, or those undertaking project-based work in addition to their regularly scheduled tasks. Here too one of the lowest paid groups of staff in the library take on work previously considered the domain of staff in more privileged positions. And if the logic that justifies passing this work to low-paid student staff is its compensatory educational value, for supervisors changes in roles and responsibilities come with the rhetoric of vocational awe, participation in the educational mission, and the selfless necessity of “supporting our students.” Making a meaningful commitment to student employment as a learner-centered and equitable educational practice necessitates examining on whose labor this practice will depend, how their work will be supported, and what changes might be required in our organizational structures to ensure it is supported fairly.

EMPLOYABILITY AND SOFT SKILLS

Figuring the educational value of library student employment as part of the compensation package, and using it as justification for expanding the responsibilities of student staff, is a narrative familiar from the logic that underpins unpaid internships: badly recompensed or uncompensated labor is pitched as a skills-building experience, an investment, that will pay dividends in the student’s future. Libraries can thus legitimize expanding
student employment “by positing that we are paying students fairly in intangible value (education), even though, and especially because, we are not paying them fairly in the form of wages.”27 This future-oriented focus on the educational and employment benefits that will accrue as a result of the student’s work experience is a consistent theme in arguments for student employment as engaged learning, in libraries and elsewhere, and conforms to what Ross J. Benbow and Matthew T. Hora identify as the employability narrative. It’s a narrative that they suggest is driven by business interests and policymakers, and results in skills-based educational imperatives that are codified in various lists, frameworks, and taxonomies.28 And it’s a narrative of which libraries must be wary in seeking to frame student employment as a learning experience.

The concept of employability or career readiness—and the collection of skills, achievements, experiences, and attributes that feed into it—individualizes responsibility for students’ success, suggesting that those who invest in themselves and commoditize themselves in the right way will be rewarded with a future return on that investment in the form of employment. This logic often overlooks the fact that students are current and not just future workers, who need to eat and pay rent in the here and now as well as after they graduate. But it also fails to acknowledge structural problems that affect employability, such as increasing job precarity, stagnating wages, the expanding gig economy, the growing wealth gap, and evaporating job pensions and benefits, and ignores the persistence and impact of discriminatory hiring practices.29 By the terms of employability discourse, failure is the result of individual deficits rather than structural oppression, making minoritized students responsible for what are actually the effects of systemic inequities.30 Libraries carelessly deploying ideas of career readiness and employability in regard to student employment therefore subscribe to educational discourses of individual responsibility and private gain that reinforce inequitable racialized economic structures.

Furthermore, ideas of employability or career readiness are inextricable from an emphasis on developing the “soft skills” (or non-cognitive or essential skills) deemed desirable by employers, like those detailed in the widely referenced NACE reports. Emphasizing such skills as a key component of the educational benefits of student employment again presents libraries with a multifaceted equity issue. Suggesting that the needs of students are self-identical to the needs of corporate employers reduces and constrains possibilities for students from the outset, and cedes the purpose of higher education to the demands of the marketplace—to producing employees rather than thinkers or citizens, and to shoring up capital rather than participatory democracy. As Ian Beilin points out, this framing of higher education manifests in pressure on libraries to teach assessable skills with workplace utility in order to demonstrate that they are contributing to definitions of student success that equate to producing “job-ready graduates.”31 But more than this, the “soft skills paradigm” posits as universal and neutral a set of skills that are actually value-laden and culturally specific, and that often embed whiteness and class privilege. Ideas about what constitute “good communication skills,” for instance, are “based on racial, gendered, and class-oriented judgements and ‘common sense’ about what is good, normal, and acceptable.”32 Orienting the educative value of student employment solely to these skills runs the risk of student employment simply being another in a long line of means by which libraries have reproduced whiteness and sought to assimilate, discipline, and civilize working-class and racial and ethnic “others” into a particular set of race-class ideals.33

The soft skills paradigm also insists that certain desirable skills are generic and universally applicable, and that “getting a job is simply a matter of a student possessing the ‘right’ skills,” when research suggests that useful job skills are actually “interconnected assemblages of skill, knowledge, and ability” that “cannot be understood if divorced from specific geographic, professional, and cultural contexts.”34 Recognizing the contextual, contingent, and culturally determined nature of the skills required by a particular profession or discipline means recognizing that they are not quick or easy to teach or learn, can’t be approached in a vacuum or developed in a stand-alone workshop, and are enmeshed with the development of other kinds of social and cultural capital.35 Students then not only need to learn those skills in context, but need to understand skills in general as situated and contextual, and recognize and respond to the different work and learning contexts in which they find themselves. Library student employment has considerable potential for supporting this kind of learning, in that it provides a real-life, embedded opportunity for learning and applying particular skills in a specific context, and for reflecting on and discerning that contextuality. Promoting reflective awareness of how definitions of “good communication” or “teamwork” might vary in differing situations is something that can be consciously threaded through students’ work experience, as can reflection on how such skills and concepts are inflected not just by
workplace context but also by gender, race, and class. Any framing of the learning value of library student employment in terms of skill development must, therefore, acknowledge the complexity of teaching and learning such skills, their situated nature, and the cultural values they index and reproduce.

**STUDENT SUCCESS**

Discourses of employability, job or career readiness, and soft skills point to the ways in which library student employment as an educational practice is pulled between the two poles of NACE and Freire, but also constitutes an opportunity to serve the differing definitions of student success that those two poles represent—success as corporate employability, and success as the critical ability to ask why the world is as it is, and to participate in its transformation. In Beilin’s words, the challenge for academic libraries “should be to teach success on two levels. We ought to encourage alternative definitions of success while at the same time ensure success in the existing system.”

For working-class students, first-generation students, and students of color, acquiring workplace skills may in fact be a necessity “for the survival of students themselves.” Navigating both the material realities of students’ lives and the socioeconomic and political realities of our institutions requires identifying, in Karen Nicholson’s phrase, the “constraints and affordances” presented by this neoliberal context. Beilin suggests that “focusing on the immediate local needs of a specific context can allow us to effectively promote dual success,” and the local context of student employment certainly affords us the opportunity to both help students survive within the inequitable systems we have while encouraging alternate definitions of success and developing the critical capacity to see how those systems might be changed.

How we engage, then, with narratives of employability and soft skills can reflect the fact that “capitalism does not set the only or exclusive terms for thinking about students and/as workers.” Adopting a learner-centered approach and taking a cue from Beilin, we can ask students themselves what constitutes success, in their work with us and longer term, and not adhere to one-size-fits-all learning outcomes informed by the needs of corporate employers. We can also prepare students to deal with the discrimination that can shape the job-seeking process, and we can acknowledge the fact of precarity and the gig economy. We can consciously avoid propping up meritocratic myths, and use the daily realities of library work as occasions for critical conversations about workplace skills and labor conditions. What better situation, indeed, to think through authority as constructed? In short, we can strive for greater transparency in discussing the social, economic, and cultural context of employment in order to prepare students for that reality, raise their critical consciousness about it, and “discover ways it can be challenged, opposed, and overcome.” The very real work context of the library provides an opportunity to engage students in conversations about not just how things currently are, but also how they might be different.

**NOTES**

3. Though I use the term equity throughout this paper, I want to acknowledge critiques of equity as a concept, including as part of the now proverbial DEI package. Scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott and Sara Ahmed have identified how DEI discourse works to maintain the inequitable structures of the university and forestall radical change. But in a recent talk, Walcott noted that equity can nevertheless be understood as a “transitional idea,” an “opening, a beginning, a bridge,” a “causeway to a different set of human relations,” and a way into thinking about how “inequities frame our everyday lives at both the macro and micro levels.” And it’s in that spirit that I use equity here—aware of its compromises and limitations, wary of its institutionalized usage, but as a way to start asking questions and thinking change that might help us on our way to somewhere fundamentally different. See Rinaldo Walcott, “After Equity: ‘Another University Now’” (lecture, Diversity: Its History & Purpose Speaker Series, Department of African and African-American Studies at the University of Kansas, March 4, 2021), https://youtu.be/-1Zv1OHKpkA.


8. Brim, Poor Queer Studies, 36.


11. See: Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and Jone T. Damasco, "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians: An Experimen


16. Olivia Baca, Cindy Pierard, and Anne Schultz, "Connecting Student Employment to Student Learning and Development" (National Institute for Assessment Learning, University of Illinois and Indiana University, Urbana, IL, June 2020).


22. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 34.

23. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 5. For ungrading see: Susan D. Blum, ed., Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead) (Morgantown: West...
Virginia University Press, 2020).


34. Benbow and Hora, “Reconsidering College Student Employability,” 508.

35. Hora, Benbow, and Smolarek, “Re-thinking Soft Skills and Student Employability.”


41. Pusser, “Of a Mind to Labor,” 149.