

# National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators' Federal Work-Study Research:

## FOCUS GROUPS REPORT

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The research was done through a partnership between NASFAA and Public Agenda.

## ABOUT NASFAA

NASFAA is a nonprofit membership organization that represents more than 20,000 financial aid professionals at nearly 3,000 colleges, universities, and career schools across the country. NASFAA member institutions serve nine out of every 10 undergraduates in the United States. Based in Washington, DC, NASFAA is the only national association with a primary focus on student aid legislation, regulatory analysis, and training for financial aid administrators. For more information, visit [www.nasfaa.org](http://www.nasfaa.org).

## ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To better understand how Federal Work-Study (FWS) works at different colleges and universities across the country, Public Agenda and NASFAA convened 11 focus groups with a total of 88 participants (51 unique participants; some participated in more than one group) in March 2016. These groups were comprised of financial aid administrators (FAAs) and other individuals who worked for four-year public institutions, private institutions, and community colleges and indicated they handled one or more components related to the administration of the FWS program, as identified by an online survey conducted by NASFAA in February 2016. These focus groups discussed innovative practices in FWS; challenges and pain points in the administration of the program; and ways institutions can use data to improve it.

We designed the project to improve understanding of the following:

1. Current practices of strong and well-administered FWS programs that are effective in helping more students to persist and complete their degrees and credentials;
2. Ways that strong, well-administered FWS programs operate differently by institutional sector and at different student grade levels; and
3. Promising and innovative practices, pain points, and data usage in FWS administration.

Across sectors, focus group participants expressed their passion for and commitment to FWS. Even though administering FWS represents only a small portion of their overall responsibilities relating to federal student aid, all of the focus-group participants expressed high levels of commitment to the program. Participants made it clear during our conversations that they are passionate about making FWS a good experience for students living on the economic margins and helping more students have an affordable and enriched college experience.

Because of the program's relatively small size compared to other financial aid programs, participants said they cannot do everything they would like to with FWS. FWS tends to get less attention from others in the financial aid office (FAO) who are not directly involved in its administration. Participants said not everyone at their institution understands or values FWS, and this makes it even harder to secure the resources and support necessary for effective implementation of innovative and promising practices.

Based on the findings from these focus groups, we put forth the following recommendations that address the project goals:

- #1: Revise the campus-based aid allocation formula.
- #2: Expand the definition of the community service requirement.
- #3: Develop a best practices toolkit.
- #4: Develop a data infrastructure and support for data use.
- #5: Leverage expertise across the institution.
- #6: Use FWS to reduce loan borrowing and indebtedness.
- #7: Implement peer mentoring.

# INTRODUCTION

**N**ASFAA and Public Agenda designed this project to better understand how FWS works at different colleges and universities across the United States. We sought to gather and examine insights from individuals administering the program at the postsecondary institutional level and develop recommendations to help improve the administration and understanding of the program.

In particular, we designed the project to improve understanding of the following:

1. Current practices of strong and well-administered FWS programs that are effective in helping more students to persist and complete their degrees and credentials;
2. Ways that strong, well-administered FWS programs operate differently by institutional sector and at different student grade levels; and
3. Promising and innovative practices, pain points, and data usage in FWS administration.

## FOCUS GROUP ADMINISTRATION

On March 23 and 24, 2016, NASFAA convened 11 focus groups with a total of 88 participants (51 unique participants; some participated in more than one group) in Baltimore, Maryland. Group participants came from a variety of colleges and universities — community colleges, four-year public institutions, four-year private not-for-profit institutions, and for-profit colleges. We placed participants in focus groups by institutional sector and their responses to NASFAA's February 2016 national survey. In that survey, respondents indicated the themes about which they had information to share: innovative and promising practices, challenges and pain points, or data use for tracking and improving FWS.

Overall we conducted four groups on innovative practices, four groups on challenges and pain points, and three groups on data usage. Each discussion ran one hour and 20 minutes. Facilitators encouraged participants to explain and discuss what their institutions had experienced and how certain aspects of FWS affected students and the institution. A copy of our focus group protocols is available upon request by emailing [research@nasfaa.org](mailto:research@nasfaa.org).

This report describes the insights gathered from these focus group discussions, cross-cutting themes and sector variations, differences by grade level, and in-depth findings by sector. It also includes recommendations for lawmakers, NASFAA, and institutions participating in the FWS program developed based on the focus group discussions.

## LIMITATIONS

As with all methodologies, qualitative research has benefits and limitations. Qualitative research allows for detailed, in-depth examinations of issues. In contrast to quantitative research, which aims at being generalizable across populations, qualitative research seeks to add texture and dimension through data collection focused on the nuances of human experience. As a complement to quantitative research, qualitative research can afford deeper insight into complex issues.

The present study has several limitations that readers should take into account while interpreting the results. First, the number of total focus group participants ( $n=88$ ) only represents 2.6% of the 3,323 institutions who participated in the FWS program during the 2015–16 award year<sup>1</sup>, and some individuals participated in more than one focus group. Second, we asked individuals to participate based on their response to an online survey. This may have introduced some degree of self-selection bias due to the possibility that individuals who are more involved in FWS may have been more likely to agree to participate in the focus groups. Third, we based the selection of participants on self-identification and scheduling availability. Thus, the study's sample of institutions is not representative of all FWS programs in the United States, and the findings of this research should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive.

Throughout this report, we use the term “promising practices” because while the qualitative evidence base for these is strong, there has not yet been enough quantitative research or replication to warrant the label “best practices.” More rigorous research is needed to establish the generalizability of these as best practices.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE REQUIREMENTS AND FUNDING FORMULA BACKGROUND

Before presenting the focus group findings and our overall recommendations, it is important to understand the FWS community service requirement and funding formula. The following information should provide the necessary background to assist readers' overall comprehension of these elements.

*Community Service:* Since 1992, the stated purpose of the FWS program has included encouraging federal aid recipients to participate in community service activities that will benefit the nation and engender in the students a sense of social responsibility and commitment to the community. Statute requires institutions to inform all eligible students of the

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2015). Federal Campus-Based Programs Data Book. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/finaid/prof/resources/data/databook2015/databook2015.html>

opportunity to perform community service, and they must use at least 7% of their annual allocations to pay students employed in community services designed to improve the quality of life for community residents, particularly low-income individuals, or to solve specific problems related to their needs. An institution's FWS community service effort must include at least one student employed as a reading tutor for children and one family literacy project. Although this employment may be located on campus, the service provided must be open and accessible to the community outside of the institution.

*Funding Formula:* The law specifies a formula to allocate among all participating institutions the FWS funds that Congress appropriates for any given award year. The formula

provides a guaranteed amount based on what the institution received for fiscal year 1999 and a "fair share" of any portion of the appropriation that remains after satisfying all institutional guarantees. The institution's fair share is determined using data about the institution's federal student financial aid applicants from the second previous year, as collected by the annual Fiscal Operations Report and Application to Participate (FISAP). An institution's fair share of 2017-18 funds, for example, is calculated based on data about its aid applicants from the 2015-16 award year. The base guarantee ensures a degree of consistent funding from year to year, while the fair share addresses the relative need of the institution's students as compared to that of all other participating institutions.

## PART ONE: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

In this summary, we focus on the high-level, cross-cutting themes that emerged across institutional sectors in our three key areas of inquiry: innovation and promising practices, data use, and challenges and pain points. In addition, we detail the most important sector-specific findings that emerged in these conversations. Because there is great interest in FWS as it relates to different grade levels of students, we also summarize grade-specific findings here. Finally, we summarize the most frequently discussed ideas for improvement raised by participants and present them as seven recommendations. Five of the recommendations apply to any sector and two are sector-specific.

### CROSS-CUTTING THEMES & SECTOR VARIATION

#### *Innovation and Promising Practices*

*Themes:* Because FWS is smaller and sometimes overlooked relative to federal grant and loan programs, most institutions are struggling to do more with less. This has spurred a great deal of creativity and innovation in building partnerships with on-campus and off-campus employers. Innovations are aimed largely at increasing the number of students placed in meaningful and sufficiently funded positions that align with their interests and programs of study. On the process side, innovations come in the form of program leaders finding creative ways to administer FWS and collect data through offices on campus that already have an infrastructure in place for such work. Because FWS is under-resourced relative to other federal student aid programs, most of these innovations would fall under the heading of "necessity is the mother of invention." Few FWS administrators have the resources to innovate in robust, scalable ways, in part because they struggle to make the case at the institution for FWS as an important part of the student success and completion puzzle.

*Sector Variation:* Finding meaningful employment that connects with students' interests and programs of study is especially challenging for community colleges, as they are particularly resource starved. In our conversations, participants from four-year institutions, and especially private not-for-profit institutions reported the most success in forging strong, durable partnerships with off-campus employers. They also described having more time and resources for promising practices such as peer mentoring and training for FWS supervisors and students. The more resources an institution has, the easier it is to engage in these sorts of activities. Thus, it's unsurprising that participants from private not-for-profit four-year institutions describe a more robust approach to adopting and refining promising practices.

For both four-year public and private institutions, off-campus employment is clearly prioritized as a vehicle for connecting FWS positions to students' areas of interest and programs of study. Results from our conversations suggest that, in general, it is significantly easier for four-year institutions to frame FWS as a meaningful part of a student's educational experience than it is for community colleges. Because many of these institutions have a more firmly established research function and graduate programs, they also have an easier time working creatively to build on-campus undergraduate research FWS positions, whereas on-campus employment at community colleges is more likely to be in clerical positions.

#### *Data Use*

*Themes:* Participants in every group agreed that data use can and should play an extremely important role in both case-making and continuous improvement of the FWS program. Across the groups, participants expressed the strong belief that robust data usage is key to helping persuade

school leaders that FWS is a worthy priority because it can reveal the positive effects of the program on retention, completion, default rates, and labor-market outcomes for program participants. Beyond using data to help make FWS an institutional priority, collecting and analyzing data on student and employer experiences can help pinpoint areas for program improvement.

Despite this widespread belief in the power of good data collection and use, very few institutions are collecting much data on FWS, according to focus group participants. Many suggested that lack of resources and technical expertise prevents their institution from collecting or using data about the FWS program, despite believing in its significant potential benefits. If data collection was prioritized and effectively resourced, participants said it would help them more carefully track the academic progress of FWS students, administer programs more efficiently and effectively, better understand student employment patterns, and forge stronger partnerships with off-campus employers. Improved tracking of student hours, and better overall monitoring of the awards would help prevent the common problem of students exhausting their award midyear.

*Sector Variations:* Community colleges face special challenges raising the profile of FWS as a meaningful part of the student success and completion picture. Participants in the community college focus group expressed particular interest in using data to inform students about ways FWS can help them reduce their borrowing. Four-year institutions, particularly private not-for-profits, reported stronger data collection practices and greater ease in using data to ensure that FWS positions align with students' programs of study; nonetheless, all struggle to collect and use data effectively.

Participants from for-profit institutions also face a unique challenge. They suggested that negative media coverage of their sector has made it more difficult to create strong partnerships with potential off-campus employers, who view the colleges and their students with some suspicion.

### *Challenges and Pain Points*

*Themes:* Common pain points that cut across sectors include funding shortfalls, technical and systems' challenges associated with effective tracking of FWS funds and student work hours, time- and resource-consuming community service requirements, and challenges associated with creating strong channels of communication among the various offices involved in FWS. Comments made in the focus groups suggest that private not-for-profit institutions experience these pain points with less intensity than their community college and four-year public counterparts. Across the groups, participants reported funding shortfalls leading to underfunded positions or too few positions, lack of resources for training and preparation of

supervisors and students, and insufficient bandwidth for robust data collection and use. For all groups, communication with on-campus employers — including effective training of work supervisors, communication with students to ensure thorough orientation, communication between offices involved in the administration of the program to ensure seamless financial processes, and communication between FWS and off-campus employers — present a daunting host of challenges.

At a more granular level, most of the participants expressed that meeting the community service requirement is an ongoing challenge. These positions are more difficult to establish and more costly with respect to fulfilling formal administrative requirements such as background checks. Effective training of supervisors and students is especially important and difficult in these settings.

*Sector Variation:* Community colleges experienced all of the challenges and pain points with greater intensity than the others sectors. The focus-group conversations with community college practitioners suggest that the multi-mission nature of these institutions, the complexity of the student populations they serve, and the comparative lack of resources at these institutions conspire to raise greater barriers to effective administration of FWS in the community college setting.

## **DIFFERENCES BY GRADE LEVEL**

Although we asked participants several questions aimed at understanding whether differences exist according to grade level, these conversations did not yield a great deal of information. Grade level seems to be most relevant, however, in four specific areas:

1. Many participants across the sectors said that community service FWS positions are a better fit for more advanced students because of the maturity that many of these sometimes-challenging settings call for. This is reflected as a grade-level difference for four-year students and as an age difference for community college students.
2. Participants from across the sectors reported that incoming first-year students, especially those coming straight from high school, often lack the basic office skills necessary for success in the most common on-campus clerical positions. As might be expected, participants from four-year institutions also expressed that lack of workplace experience means that incoming first-year students tasked with locating their own positions have a harder time than their upper-division peers finding off-campus employment opportunities.
3. In cases where more advanced students are placed in more complex or substantive positions, either

as undergraduate researchers on campus or in community service positions off campus, the pay rate is generally higher. This means that more advanced students are more likely to find better-paying positions.

4. The most pronounced grade-level difference we encountered is also a sectoral difference: Participants from several four-year institutions were more likely to say that their institution discourages first-year students from applying for FWS because they believe students in their first year are less capable of balancing the demands of work and school. Participants from four-year institutions that expressed an explicit commitment to tying FWS to students' academic goals were also more likely to say that they discourage incoming freshman from participating in off-campus FWS because these positions are better suited to students who have a firmer handle on their own academic trajectory. Some participants from four-year institutions, especially those from private universities, reported that they recommend that students not work at all during their first semester and that they take only on-campus positions until they are more advanced in their studies and are thus ready for an off-campus FWS internship experience. These institutions were also more likely to indicate that community service positions are most appropriate for graduate students.

## IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

While focus group participants had a wide range of ideas for improving FWS, input coalesced around five key recommendations that cut across all sectors and two sector-specific recommendations.

### #1: Revise the Campus-Based Aid Allocation Formula

While participants from all types of institutions cited FWS funding challenges, participants from community colleges seemed to experience the most acute struggles; these are partially related to the high levels of financial need usually found among the populations they serve. The campus-based aid allocation formula should be revised to more accurately and equitably reflect the comparative need of the student's populations of schools applying for campus-based aid allocations. This can be accomplished by eliminating the base guarantee and including phase-in protection so that no institution has a funding decrease or increase of more than 10% per year. The base guarantee of funding, currently based on FY 1999 expenditures, was intended to be a temporary measure to mitigate losses to individual institutions that could result from radical fluctuations in funding. Due to the static nature of the formula, the prior-year expenditure for

most schools is linked to the school's program participation in the 1970s. Thus, today's allocation of campus-based funds largely reflects a 40-year-old model for distribution of program funds. The base-guarantee assures funding for certain long-established institutions, leaving less funding available for growing schools serving increasing numbers of financially needy students. By eliminating the base guarantee, allocations would be based only on a fair-share formula. A phase-in protection would ensure that no institution's allocation would increase or decrease by more than 10% per year, avoiding large swings in allocations from year to year.

### #2: Expand the Definition of Community Service

Citing difficulty in meeting the requirement, many participants acknowledged that they would like to see the definition of eligible community service expanded so that more jobs could qualify. For example, current law includes "child care services provided on campus that are open and accessible to the community" HEA §441(c)(1) [42 U.S.C. 2751] in the definition of community service. Child care facilities that only serve employees and students of the institution are not considered open and accessible to the community. NASFAA recommends that this definition be revised to acknowledge that the "community" includes faculty, staff, and students residing off-campus, and that on-campus child care facilities that give priority to institutional employees and students may count as community service so long as they do not actually bar members of the community at large who are not associated with the institution.

### #3: Develop a Best Practices Toolkit

Focus-group participants expressed a wide range of needs related to implementing best practices in the design and administration of FWS. Any toolkit of materials for those involved in administering FWS should include guidance for training FWS employees and supervisors, accessible communications and marketing materials to educate students and relevant on-campus departments about the value of FWS, and a checklist of best practices to ensure that students are placed in positions that will be of greatest benefit to them. A more ambitious approach would be a comprehensive manual for postsecondary institutions on how to navigate the entire FWS process, connect FWS with student success efforts, and make FWS a marketable program. This toolkit or manual could be produced by NASFAA or the U.S. Department of Education (ED), but should be developed in collaboration with FAAs, FWS program administrators, and staff in other offices that work with FWS students.

#### #4: Development of a Data Infrastructure and Support for Data Use

Across groups, input from participants suggested that the creation of a central database would allow institutions to easily compare their FWS student data on key measures such as retention, graduation, loan default, and post-graduation labor market outcomes and/or transfer rates and outcomes. This dataset could be created by ED, since they receive fiscal information and recipient data for the federal campus-based programs and have other metrics such as graduation and default rates, in other federal databases. In the absence of a robust database (or as a complement to such a database, should one be created), NASFAA should provide professional development and training to support financial aid professionals in using data to strengthen their FWS program.

#### #5: Leveraging Expertise across the Institution

Despite resource constraints, input from the focus groups suggests that FAOs can and should be working with other offices and departments in their institutions to strengthen FWS in various areas. Examples raised by focus group participants included working more effectively with institutional research to pull better data, working with the career services office to help with employment matching and building relationships with off-campus employers, and working with academic affairs and student services to create summer FWS opportunities for incoming students that align with and support overall orientation of new students.

#### #6: Use FWS to Reduce Loan Borrowing and Indebtedness

Several participants — particularly community college participants — noted that they would ultimately like to learn more about how the FWS program can help to reduce overall student debt. The interplay between FWS and student debt fits nicely with NASFAA's existing recommendation to allow Financial Aid Administrators (FAA) the authority to limit loan amounts for certain categories of students. An example of this would be allowing aid administrators to set a policy making all of their part-time students eligible for only half of the annual loan limit. (Schools could, however, use professional judgment on a case-by-case basis if they deemed the student needed the full amount.) This authority, coupled with an effort to use FWS in place of the other half of the loan amount, would allow students to finance their education with less debt and more work experience. Participants agreed that better data would be necessary to determine the amount of additional funds and administrative resources that would be needed as well as the potential effectiveness of such an approach.

#### #7: Implement Peer Mentoring

Input from participants suggests that students further along in their academic careers are the most likely to be successful in FWS positions. Using seasoned FWS students as peer mentors/coaches for new work-study students and/or incoming freshmen might help significantly more first-time and first-year work-study students successfully balance work and school, making the most of their FWS opportunity as a coherent part of their overall education.

## PART 2: IN-DEPTH FINDINGS BY INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR

In this section, we present detailed information on our three themes and participants' ideas for improvement by sector. It should be noted that when we asked focus group participants to brainstorm "ideas for improvement," we did not ask them to determine who would create and/or implement these ideas. Many of these ideas require much more thought and research on potential benefits, risks, and approaches. We hope that interested institutions may use ideas from these discussions to improve FWS at their own colleges and universities. Also note that we identified focus group participants based on their responses to a national survey administered in February 2016, and survey response rates for graduate and professional institutions and for-profit institutions were low. As a result, only two focus group participants from each of these sectors attended the in-person focus groups, making us unable to detail their response data by sector. However, we incorporated their feedback into the overall focus group findings in Part 1 of this report.

### SECTOR: COMMUNITY COLLEGES

#### *Innovation and Promising Practices*

For participants from community colleges, innovative and promising practices fell into three broad categories: job placement of FWS students; job success for students and employers; and practices within the institution administering the program.

Regarding job placements, participants primarily focused on practices that help tie FWS to students' areas of study, including the following:

- Surveying students about their interests and skills and using the survey results to match students to open positions;
- Requiring departments on campus to account for how the work they offer will enhance the student's academic and professional development; and

- Conducting background work to ensure that placement in positions outside of the college is consistent with student interests.

For students' jobs, participants suggested the following practices to make their employment a good experience:

- Holding mandatory training and orientation for FWS supervisors;
- Ensuring that all FWS positions include job descriptions with student learning outcomes;
- Creating opportunities for students to meet with FWS supervisors (who are not their work supervisors) to ensure appropriate attention to the academic standing and progress of students; and
- Working closely with HR to ensure students are treated like other staff at the institution.

Regarding program administration, participants identified several innovative practices, including the following:

- Creating an institutional process, tied to formal "in-service" professional development requirements, to review what aspects of the FWS program work well and what can be improved;
- Using the regulatory language issued by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to help communicate the value and importance of FWS to other departments on and off campus;
- Identifying allies and creating partnerships across the institution and cultivating those relationships; and
- Creating robust channels of communication with employers on and off campus to ensure clear, shared expectations about students' responsibilities and hours.

When asked about the traits of an ideal community college FWS program, participants described a program that would be purposefully aligned with academic programs, structured to encourage off-campus employment and incentivize innovation, funded based on levels of student need at the institution, automated for both ease of administration and student monitoring purposes, and simplified with respect to reporting to ED. They also expressed that the ideal program would be valued by the institution as part of the broader student development process and as a core part of the broader financial aid narrative that currently focuses on grants and loans.

## Data Use

Input from participants in the focus group suggests wide variation in data collection and use at community colleges. Particularly creative community colleges have found ways to use existing data to inform their FWS program, and some are collecting and using significantly more data than others. For example, some community colleges use high school transcripts, with particular focus on students' extracurricular activities and GPAs, to better understand whether first-year students will be able to balance the multiple responsibilities that come with FWS.

Most colleges collect basic data, much of which is used for compliance purposes, such as expected family contribution based on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), enrollment history, hours of attendance at the college, number of students working on and off campus, and number of students visiting the financial aid sections of the college website. But participants said that a more robust approach to data usage would include more and better measures.

In an ideal world, institutions would use data to more carefully track the academic progress of FWS students, administer programs more efficiently and effectively, improve understanding of student employment patterns, and inform and strengthen partnerships with off-campus employers. Participants in this group had a special interest in using data to help students understand how FWS can assist in reducing their borrowing.

Participants in this group suggested that strong data on employer and student satisfaction should be a priority. These data could be used to improve practice and ensure that FWS is of maximum benefit to students. But there is a significant discrepancy between the data that participants say would be most helpful and the data that are actually gathered. According to the NASFAA national survey administered in February 2016 as part of this project, the reality is that few colleges collect data on student or employer satisfaction about FWS jobs. The community college focus group said that such data would allow them to find out from employers whether they would recommend the student and the FWS program to another employer. But finding ways to get reliable, quality feedback from employers and students about the FWS experience remains an ongoing challenge.

Some participants had stronger channels of communication with on-campus employers than others, built through consistent efforts to help on-campus employers feel vested in the program. These participants felt they received higher response rates on employer satisfaction surveys because FWS staff communicates often with on-campus employers about why they collect the data, how it helps the institution, and how it can help make better matches to students in the future.

One participant reported using significantly more data in FWS after revamping and centralizing the institution's program. Their new measures included the following:

- Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and credit-load
- Impact of FWS on student borrowing
- Impact of FWS on retention
- Supervisor and student satisfaction
- Labor market outcomes for FWS students after graduation

The data that most community colleges are not currently collecting, but that participants believed would be especially useful, includes the following:

- Comparisons between FWS students and non-FWS students: Are FWS workers stronger academically than their non-FWS peers? Most believe this to be true, but it is hard to prove with existing data.
- Retention data: Does FWS help support student persistence and retention? Participants said they assume it does because they believe FWS helps engage and involve students on campus, and the research base that connects student engagement and retention is well established. Singling out the effect of FWS on student persistence is difficult, but many colleges are interested in this measure. Some colleges are conducting ad hoc checks on retention or collecting anecdotal information, but they believe they need to do it more formally.
- Alumni engagement: Do FWS students donate more than others?
- Better data to match students to employers: What are the best practices associated with ensuring that students have work that is relevant to their area of study?
- Better data on labor-market outcomes: Do graduates with FWS experience do better in the labor market than others?
- Data on student decision making: What makes students want to apply for FWS, and what deters students from applying?
- Data related to equity: Are FWS students representative of the institution's student population, and under what conditions are FWS programs particularly beneficial for historically disadvantaged populations?
- Data on the outcomes and impacts of on-campus vs. off-campus employment: Do FWS students with off-campus employment have an easier time finding full-time employment after graduation?

## Challenges and Pain Points

Community college participants said their institutions face a number of challenges in making FWS a strong, student-centered enterprise supportive of overall student development. As one participant said, too often individuals on campus who are not involved in FWS view the program as a "free, part-time clerical labor force." As such, too few supervisors take the program seriously, and there exists little incentive for innovation within the program. One participant noted, "There's no reward for being innovative." According to participants, current practices are characterized by a lack of coordination with HR and other college offices, poor communication structures, onerous reporting requirements, insufficient staffing to administer and track impacts of FWS on student persistence, and non-competitive wages for students. Given these challenges, it is no wonder that many participants said that some programs lack interest from students, while many others said they run out of funds midyear and have great difficulty raising additional funds to support positions.

*Funding:* Nearly a quarter of survey respondents said it is "very difficult" to find additional funding to pay students when funds run out midyear, and the impact on students can be devastating. As funds dry up, so does students' ability to pay vital expenses like transportation and childcare. Moreover, when shortfalls in FWS funding force students to find employment on their own, it greatly increases the chance that the job those students will find will interfere with academic progress. In the worst cases, these challenges can lead students to stop out or drop out.

*Data:* Despite the examples of creativity and innovation described by some participants, everyone reported significant challenges that complicate and impede strong data use practices. Resource constraints, resulting both from ever-tightening budgets and lack of institutional prioritization of FWS, prevent most community colleges from developing and deploying strong data use practices.

Related to resource constraints, community colleges face significant technical challenges around collecting and storing data. Participants described a number of inefficiencies, which are especially damaging because FWS is only one part of the many responsibilities of each office. For example, a number of participants said that, because the payroll and student records' data systems aren't integrated, their community colleges are still using manual entries to determine whether students are close to exceeding their allotment. Manual transfer of data from Excel sheets is both labor intensive and unreliable. Slow, inefficient, or non-existent systems to track crucial information mean students are in danger of exceeding their allotted hours without anyone realizing it in time. Such approaches work only for schools that have a small number of FWS students, and are prohibitive of program scale-up.

### *Ideas for Improvement*

Participants discussed potential improvements to the program such as increasing overall support, additional technical assistance, and more data collection. Their recommendations included the following:

- Develop an instruction manual that would provide detailed guidance and best practices in the design and administration of FWS, including techniques and data collection protocols for FWS, and best practices for building strong connections between FWS and other departments on campuses such as career services.
- Build or deploy an existing alert system to prevent students from exceeding the allocation.
- Connect student records with payroll, for example by investing in creating integrated payroll and student records systems, to help institutions avoid relying on manual data workarounds.
- Create stronger connections between the institutional research function (IR) and FWS to expand bandwidth around data collection.
- Improve the FWS data collection capacities of existing systems (e.g., PeopleSoft, Banner, Ed Express, Crystal, and Advance).
- Develop a central repository of data to give a more accurate picture of the students served through FWS.

## **SECTOR: FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

### *Innovation and Promising Practices*

Participants from four-year public institutions, many of whom administer programs that can include hundreds or even thousands of students, discussed a wide variety of potential innovations and promising practices.

Regarding job placements, participants found the following practices most helpful:

- Offering FWS to incoming freshmen in the summer, before the fall semester begins, as a recruitment tool and as part of overall orientation to the university experience.
- Providing undergraduate research assistantships to students, both as a way to provide meaningful FWS experiences and as a vehicle for preparing students for graduate school.
- Responding to student demand for additional positions or more hours by creating more work opportunities. In some cases, graduate students engaged in research work approach FWS administrators to ask whether they could be compensated through FWS.

- Explicitly linking community service jobs to students' majors to ensure relevance and to increase personal investment on the part of students and job supervisors.

For students' jobs, participants suggested the following practices to make employment a good experience:

- Engaging employers so that they, as well as students, have a stake in FWS and feel invested in the match.
- Developing peer-mentor strategies. For example, some institutions place FWS students in the FAO and train them to serve as financial aid peer mentors. This can serve both to help manage the heavy traffic experienced by FAOs and to provide meaningful work experience to participating students.
- Training FWS supervisors and students. Prioritizing training for higher-need students and first-year students was mentioned as especially important, because many of these students arrive at college without basic office skills necessary for success in FWS positions.
- Hiring FWS students who are further along in their academic careers to train newer students as they enter community service positions, and providing this training throughout the duration of the job.

Regarding program administration, participants identified the following innovative practices:

- Employing a full-time person to manage the community service program. This allows for the ongoing development of strong relationships with off-campus employers and the creation of robust training processes and peer-mentoring strategies for students.
- Using existing programs in other departments as a way to more efficiently allocate and administer FWS. In many cases, faculty and staff from other relevant departments agree to take on hiring, payroll, training, and timesheet monitoring for FWS students because doing so fits within programs already being run by the department.
- Using the university's human resources (HR) office to handle all on-campus employment for FWS to increase efficiency in program administration.
- Using automatic or even manual warning systems to help employers and students know when students are about to run out of FWS money.

Our conversations suggested that off-campus employment is a higher priority for four-year public institutions than it is for community colleges, and participants in these conversations identified the following elements as of particular significance:

- Off-campus employment is prioritized because students and administrators view the positions as more relevant and academically beneficial than on-campus work opportunities, which are often more clerical.
- While very few graduate students currently have off-campus FWS employment, many expressed that off-campus employment could work very well for graduate students if it were directly tied to the students' research interests.
- Being selective about the number of off-campus partnerships pursued is desirable. Some participants described past problems with having too many partners to monitor effectively.

### Data Usage

Participants from four-year public institutions reported facing several challenges to collecting data, most of which stem from FWS being only a small portion of their work and responsibility. As with community colleges, participants from four-year public institutions said they are not able to do as much as they would like with data collection and usage.

Limited data collection is the norm, according to participants, and is confined to the following activities:

- Allocation and spending over time: This mainly serves to monitor where students are in their allocations and to send warnings to students and employers when students are getting close the end of their award.
- Average awards each year: This allows for planning for next year's awards.
- Short surveys: Surveying FWS students at the end of the year to ask whether they want to return to the same job the following year.

Most also collect grade point averages (GPAs) of students in FWS as part of determining general satisfactory academic progress (SAP), but the data is not being used to better understand, or inform improvements to their FWS program.

One participant's institution collected student and employers survey data for a specific FWS program that involved working with on-campus professors. They received a good response rate and used the data to better understand satisfaction and skill gains, as well as to improve the program. The institution did not track the rate at which these students went to graduate school, which was one of the key goals of the program.

In an evaluation of the America Reads/Counts program, one university surveyed FWS students who served as mentors and coordinators. The survey yielded a good response rate and provided valuable information to help with program improvement.

Although their institutions were not collecting much data, participants from four-year public institutions had a long list of data desires that they believed would be useful for the program:

- Retention and graduation data for all student-employment students;
- Student satisfaction, experience, and needs surveys;
- Employer surveys for student evaluation;
- Employer surveys for program evaluation;
- Long-term impact studies following students to examine factors such as how FWS may have helped them, whether they go to grad school, and what types of jobs they get; and
- Data broken down by demographics, especially socioeconomic status and first-generation students.

For participants in these conversations, better data collection and use would help answer a set of core questions:

- Are all FWS jobs good because they provide real work experience, or are jobs that align with students' majors/interests better?
- Is it FWS or student employment in general that makes a difference in student success rates?
- Is it true that FWS increases retention by connecting students to campuses and giving them a greater sense of purpose?
- Why do some students reject the FWS award?
- Is it better for students to continue the same job every year with increasing responsibilities, or is it better for them to change jobs every year?
- Does the type of FWS job have an impact on students' skills and labor market readiness?
- Does receiving FWS at the beginning of one's college career versus later make a difference for students?

### Challenges and Pain Points

Participants from four-year public institutions identified inadequate funding as the most important challenge and pain point they face. There are too many needy students and not enough money to cover all of their wages for a full year. To cover the gaps, these participants reported taking money from their own institutional grants or departments, which are also facing funding cuts. Their institutions are awarding FWS to fewer students because they do not have enough funding

for all who would qualify. These participants reported running out of funds or having insufficient funds for students as a major issue and described having “too little” funds allocated for FWS as their biggest challenge.

One participant, who has worked for an institution for 17 years, expressed it this way:

*We have not seen an increase in the FWS authorization in those 17 years. And minimum wage has gone up....And then it becomes the challenge of who to award. Do you award on a first-come, first-served basis? Departments want the students they have had before to come back, so then you cannot award on a first-come, first-served basis.*

This funding shortfall causes several problems. When the institution does not have enough funding for every student who qualifies and could benefit, it puts FAAs in the difficult spot of deciding which eligible students get FWS awards and which do not. Because of low FWS wages, students are more likely to take off-campus jobs. Such jobs may pay more, but non-FWS employers may not be as committed to putting students’ schooling first by offering flexible schedules to support their attendance and completion. Part of the problem, participants said, is that FWS funding has not grown in proportion to the rising minimum wage that institutions must pay.

Some public institutions have turned to other funding sources, such as grants, to make up funding shortfalls. But these alternative funding sources are uncertain and are generally viewed as temporary. Public universities are in a tough spot when their FWS funding runs out, because making the case for additional resources for FWS is difficult in the face of dwindling state budgets and limited institutional funding.

Participants expressed that the current funding is inadequate and agreed that the allocation formula needs to be addressed. Many expressed frustration that their institution will never get far beyond their base guarantee amount, and thus will never see the increases required to serve all of their students in need. It is important to note, however, that not all participants fully understood how the federal government calculates the FWS allotment.

Community service requirements present additional challenges. In this group, participants’ experiences varied widely regarding community service jobs. Some said these jobs are hard to fill; others reported having too many applicants for too few positions.

Those who had difficulty filling the positions said their problems included students not wanting to leave campus out of convenience; community service jobs being located in less safe neighborhoods; and transportation issues getting to the job site (often the school or the employers needed to provide transportation). They also cited the problem of students not being sufficiently trained for these jobs, which often take place in demanding settings that require maturity.

Those who found it hard to find enough community service positions for their applicants said that the community service jobs paid significantly more. They also had well-organized programs with good reputations that students had heard about and wanted to join. Their challenge was finding enough positions to meet student demand.

These participants also mentioned the following challenges:

- Difficulty spending FWS funds because schools cannot offer enough jobs, especially remote schools that do not have easy access to off-campus employers.
- First-year students tend to need a lot of support in both finding jobs and in being successful in those jobs.
- Difficulty publicizing jobs and lackluster job fairs that don’t translate into more robust FWS opportunities or better matches.
- Huge administrative burdens created by time sheets for off-campus employment. (Further research is needed to understand the causes of this burden.)
- Homegrown or inefficient data collection systems and processes that are not set to collect or manage larger amounts of data.

### *Ideas for Improvement*

During this sector’s conversations about improvement of FWS administration on campus, overarching themes focused on increased collection and use of data, support for program administration, and better communication between relevant departments within the institution. Three specific ideas arose from the conversations:

- Create a national data set about FWS and data sharing practices.
- Develop a manual or toolkit that can be used to support strong program design and administration. As one participant said, “We don’t want to reinvent the wheel.”
- Provide guidance on how best to link FWS with other departments (e.g., information technology, institutional research, and academic departments) to improve program efficiency and maximize benefits to students.

## SECTOR: FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

### *Innovation and Promising Practices*

The participants from four-year private institutions were generally administering programs within institutions that had greater resources and stronger internal channels of communication between departments than those of other participants. They discussed a variety of innovations and promising practices.

Regarding job placements, participants said the following practices are most helpful:

- Having students fill out a form to indicate their major and to describe their interests and skills. This can be used as a matching resource for institutions placing students, or as a reflection tool for students tasked with finding their own positions.
- Providing training for students and supervisors that focuses on helping students better understand the professional working environment and on helping supervisors better understand what it means to hire and support a FWS student.
- Creating off-campus FWS positions by leveraging relationships between other departments and outside employers.

For students' jobs, these institutions do the following to make them good experiences:

- Forming strong, ongoing partnerships with off-campus employers. A strong base of trust and longstanding working relationships between the institution and off-campus employers make it easier to ensure these are good experiences for students.
- Providing mandatory training and orientation for FWS supervisors.
- Working closely with human resources to ensure on-campus FWS students are treated like other college staff.

Regarding program administration, participants identified the following innovative practices:

- Ensuring that all FWS positions include job descriptions with student learning outcomes.
- Using data and technology to automate previously manual functions and create greater efficiencies.
- Prioritizing community service jobs for graduate programs to make them easier to fill. For example, health services graduate programs have an easier time placing students in community service positions.

Taking care to effectively match students and employers based on students' interests seems to work especially well, participants said. The following description from one participant from a four-year private institution conveys the level of attention and commitment involved in careful matching:

*I play matchmaker. We save so many jobs or positions, based on obviously our federal allocation, for incoming students. Then they have to do an application that lists their schools, experience, and intended major — because obviously they haven't necessarily declared. Then I look at that with the job descriptions I have, what departments need, how many students; and then I put them together...My track record is pretty great, so I feel good about anticipating the needs of the campus... Everybody gets at least one staffer that wants one, the students have a meaningful experience...I keep a list of kids that want to work that didn't get a job their freshman year. Then as positions open up, or if maybe I have funding that I didn't realize I had, I then take the kids off the wait list and place them in departments that still need students.*

On campus, the following are examples of successful partnerships in FWS:

- Intentional linking of FWS to IT to improve data collection processes.
- Partnerships with institutional research offices.
- Leveraging relationships with new departments or offices on campus to open up more on-campus employment opportunities for students. However, participants reported that building these relationships takes time and achieving this is hard for one-person offices.
- Collaboration with human resources, payroll, and/or business offices. These relationships can be rocky but are critical.
- Partnering with campus career centers. This allows stronger connections between FWS and students' academic and future career paths.

### *Data Usage*

Participants in this group shared how they use the data they collect to make the case to college leaders about the usefulness of FWS. They also talked about the data they would like to collect and what might be helpful in accomplishing that.

Currently, the private colleges represented in the focus group collect the following data:

- Retention data from year one to year two;
- Persistence data to graduation;
- Allocation and spending data to send warnings to students and employers when students are getting close to the end of their award;
- Average awards; and
- Survey data at the end of each year to determine if students should be placed back in position the following year.

The data they collect is useful to the institution in several ways:

- Retention and persistence data helps university administrators and others on campus understand the value of the FWS program and also helps to make the case for further support.
- Data that demonstrate the program's value make it more likely that FWS will be included in the institution's strategic plan.
- Data collected from students and employers is useful for adjusting the program to better meet student and employer needs.

### *Challenges and Pain Points*

Participants from four-year private colleges shared a number of challenges they have faced in FWS from the student side, the institution side, and the regulatory side.

As with the other groups, funding is the biggest challenge. Participants said the allocation amounts are too low to cover all of the students who qualify for FWS and to fund all of the types of jobs that would benefit these students academically and professionally. When FWS funds run out, participants spoke of "flipping the switch" and using institutional aid. A majority, if not all, of these institutions are able to support students when their FWS funds run out. They indicated that this happens so often it has become second nature to them. Nonetheless, many of the participants said they could use more money to avoid using institutional funds for this work. At one institution, the college provides twice the funds for FWS than the federal government does. These participants said they need more funding to sustain and create new jobs, meet students' needs, make the pay rate for on-campus employment competitive with higher paying jobs, and provide enough hours for students so they do not opt out of FWS for other employment opportunities.

Other challenges raised by this group include:

- Ensuring that systems allow for accurate auditing of fund expenditures and track the money in a robust manner;
- Meeting the percentage requirement for community service;
- Flipping from FWS to regular pay once students exceed their awarded amounts;
- Predicting how many students to award based on who will accept, who will actually work, and how many hours they will choose to work;
- Meeting the onerous regulatory requirements for administering FWS;
- Keeping student employees engaged in positions;
- Managing FWS with an ongoing lack of administrative staffing support;
- Ensuring a sufficient variety of jobs.

Many participants said they had trouble with the community service requirement and face the following challenges, among others:

- Students having trouble paying the costs of the background checks. It is unclear who is responsible for the costs of running background checks.
- It can be difficult to create and sustain relationships with outside organizations and non-profits, many of which are themselves facing resource and staff time constraints.

Participants believed solving these problems, in the program at large as well as in the community service component, would help students have a more successful FWS experience and lead to greater retention and completion. They also suggested that solving these problems may make it easier to create stronger linkages to career pathways in FWS jobs. Finding solutions to these challenges could make the process less confusing for outside employers and lessen the need for them to constantly monitor aggregate hours worked to ensure that their FWS employees do not exceed their awarded amount.

### *Ideas for Improvement*

Four-year private institution participants discussed potential areas for improvement centered on increasing access to data, data collection, and effective use of data. The following specific ideas arose from these conversations:

- Provide a data infrastructure to allow for better tracking of outcomes of FWS students.
- Engage ED to collect more FWS data.
- Create more professional conferences for FAAs that would offer support on data collection and overall FWS program administration and improvement.

## CONCLUSION

We hope that the information shared by the participants in these focus groups will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that exist for making FWS a true part of the student success and completion narrative for postsecondary institutions. We were struck not only by the tremendous creativity and commitment of the participants, but also in their ability and willingness to innovate every day on behalf of better outcomes for FWS students. Across groups, participants expressed a passion and commitment to FWS that should be lauded and supported. Even though FWS represents only a small portion of their overall responsibilities in administering the student aid programs, all of the participants in these focus groups expressed high levels of commitment to the program. Participants clearly demonstrated their passion for making FWS a good experience for students living on the economic margins, and for helping more students have an affordable and enriching college experience. However, because of the

program's relatively small size compared to other financial aid programs, schools struggle to make the most of FWS. We hope that this qualitative study will prepare the ground to provide more tools and resources to those working on FWS, and will help support effective implementation of promising practices in the design, administration and improvement of FWS programs.

Recommendations detailed in this report address the need for innovative and promising practices, the importance of data collection and use, and pain points experienced by the participants in our FWS focus groups. If enacted, these recommendations would allow for effective and cohesive administration of the FWS program, ensuring that administrators are not unduly burdened and that students and employers can take advantage of the many benefits that this program offers.

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