

Beyond Financial Aid: How CUNY Colleges Connect Students to Federal Work-Study Jobs

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Appendix A. Survey and Interview Methods

In order to understand how students make choices about working while enrolled in college, as well as how these experiences differ between work-study students and those in non-work-study jobs (primarily working off-campus), we collected survey and interview data. This survey and interview data was collected as part of a larger field experiment exploring the effect of receiving an FWS offer on student outcomes.

Survey Data

In the spring of 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, we randomly assigned a group of eligible¹ enrolled and prospective students to receive FWS offers. For each cohort (except the 2023 cohort), in the following spring we randomly sampled 1,000 enrolled students from the most recent randomization cohort and sent them our survey instrument (Appendix B). In it, we asked questions about the characteristics of students' work experiences (e.g., how many hours a week they worked), why they chose to work while enrolled, and how working interacted with academics (e.g., whether they ever chose a class to fit within their work schedule). We sampled within the randomization cohorts so that we have the ability to merge the survey response data with administrative data we are using for the larger project. Because 50% of the students in the randomization cohorts received an offer of FWS, we also hoped that this sampling strategy would result in some responses from work-study students.²

We worked with administrators in the Office of Student Financial Aid (OSFA) to distribute the survey. Students in our sample received an email that appeared to come from their institution. The email invited students to complete a survey about working during college in exchange for a small incentive. After the initial distribution, our contacts in OSFA sent students three reminders, each one week apart. Ultimately, the response rate was approximately 30%, on average, across the three years of the survey, giving us a total sample of 930 students.

When we fielded the survey in 2023, we asked students to indicate if they would be willing to participate in an interview or focus group to dig deeper into our questions about working while enrolled.

Interview Data

As part of our original negotiations with CUNY over the scope of this study, we agreed that we would focus the data collection (beyond the student survey) for our implementation and cost studies at six of the campuses participating in the randomized controlled trial—three community colleges and three senior colleges (i.e., primarily bachelor’s-degree-granting colleges). Our primary contact in the Office of Student Financial Aid reached out to campuses to solicit participation in this qualitative work. Ultimately, we successfully recruited three community colleges and three senior colleges to participate in the interviews for this implementation study. We maintain the anonymity of the individual colleges. Appendix C contains the protocol used for these interviews.

We began by emailing the financial aid directors at the six campuses in our sample to request interviews. Through this process, we scheduled interviews with financial aid directors and work-study coordinators at each of the campuses. In one case we interviewed the financial aid director and the work-study coordinator together, but otherwise we interviewed them separately.

We recruited students for interviews using multiple strategies. At three colleges, with the permission of the financial aid director, we visited the campus and directly solicited students for interviews. We sat in the lobby or another public space and asked passing students if they were working while enrolled. If they were, we asked if they would be willing to participate in a brief, 20 to 30 minute interview in exchange for a \$20 gift card. In this way, we collected approximately 30 interviews across three different campuses. However, when we debriefed as a research team, we realized that while this was an interesting way to collect data from working students, we did not encounter any students participating in FWS through this haphazard sampling approach. In an attempt to ensure we could collect interview data from FWS students, we asked our survey sample (only the 2023 cohort) if they were interested in participating in an interview. To further improve our access to FWS student perspectives, we asked some campus administrators for referrals of additional FWS students; we were able to recruit a handful of additional students holding work-study jobs.

We coded the administrator interviews and student interviews separately, using a flexible coding approach for each set of interviews. We first used index codes based on the interview protocols to organize interview transcripts. We then identified more specific findings within the index codes. The first author of this brief coded all of the interviews, so there was no need to assess inter-coder reliability.

Appendix B. Student Survey

You are being asked to take part in this survey because you are enrolled in a City University of New York (CUNY) campus. Researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Vanderbilt University are conducting research on how students make decisions about working during college. This survey should take approximately ten minutes to complete. By taking this survey you consent to participate in this research. If you have any questions about this research, please contact Adela Soliz (adela.r.soliz@vanderbilt.edu). Thank you for taking this survey.

Start of Block: Block 1

Q1 Have you worked for pay during this semester?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Skip To: End of Block if Have you worked for pay during this semester? = No

Q32 Did you receive an offer of work study from the financial aid office for Spring 2025?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Q33 Did you refuse any offers of federal work study for Spring 2025?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Q2 Are any of your jobs this semester a work-study job? (In other words, do you receive Federal Work-Study funding?)

- No (0)
- Yes (1)
- I don't know (9)

Display This Question If: Are any of your jobs this semester a work-study job? (In other words, do you receive Federal Work... = Yes

Q3 What were some of your reasons for choosing to participate in work study?

Please check all that apply.

- It was the easiest way for me to find a job. (1)
- I was not able to find a non-work-study job. (2)

- I felt safer taking a work-study job than a non-work-study job. (3)
- I thought I would have less exposure to COVID in a work-study job. (4)
- My work-study job was the highest-quality job I could find. (5)
- I thought my work-study job would be easier than other jobs available to me. (6)
- It takes me less time to get to my work-study job than to other jobs available to me. (7)
- Other. If other, please explain. (8) _____

Display This Question If: Did you receive an offer of work study from the financial aid office for Spring 2025? = Yes

Q4 Why did you refuse the offer of work study this semester? Select all that apply.

- I do/did not know what work study is. (1)
- I do not know how to find a work-study job. (2)
- I do not want a job. (3)
- I already have a job. (4)
- I can find a better job than a work-study job. (5)
- Work-study jobs do not pay well. (6)
- Other. If other, please explain. (7) _____

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q5 Approximately how many hours do you work in a typical week this semester, across all jobs for which you are paid?

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q6 Did you refuse any offers of federal work study for Spring 2025?

- On-campus employer, worked in person (1)
- On-campus employer, worked remotely (2)
- Off-campus employer, worked in person (3)
- Off-campus employer, worked remotely (4)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q7 Did you refuse any offers of federal work study for Spring 2025?

Please check all that apply.

- On a college-sponsored, online job board (1)
- On a non-college-sponsored, online job board (2)
- From a flyer, poster, sign or something similar from around campus (3)
- From a flyer, poster, sign or something similar off campus (4)
- Word of mouth from a friend, family member or other person (5)
- Other. If other, please explain. (6) _____

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q8 Approximately how many minutes do you spend traveling between school (or your home) and your job(s) each day, on the days that you work? Please enter a number below.

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q9 Does your work schedule usually remain the same from week to week?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q10 Are you able to change your work schedule in response to a busy week at school, for example, during final exams?

- Yes, my employer is willing to let me change my work schedule. (1)
- No, my employer will not let me change my work schedule. (2)
- I have never asked, and/or this has never been an issue for me. (3)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q11 Have you chosen a class or classes in order to fit around your work schedule at your job?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q12 Has your job changed the amount of time you would otherwise spend on campus?

- Because of my job, I spend more time on campus. (1)
- Because of my job, I spend less time on campus. (2)
- My job has not affected the amount of time I spend on campus. (3)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q13 Are any of the jobs for which you are paid this semester related to your major or field of study?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q14 Are any of the jobs for which you are paid this semester related to your post-graduation goals?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Q15 Have you learned skills at work this semester that also help you at school (such as writing skills, communication skills, how to work in a team, content knowledge, etc.)?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q16 Did you refuse any offers of federal work study for Spring 2025?

Please check all that apply.

- Writing skills (1)
- Communication skills (2)
- Teamwork (3)
- Content knowledge (4)
- Other. If other, please explain. (5) _____
- None of the above (6)

Display This Question If: Have you worked for pay during this semester? = Yes

Q17 Which of the following have you experienced as the result of having a job?
Please check all that apply.

- I have earned money (1)
- I now have someone I could ask for a reference. (2)
- I have learned things at work that I use at school. (3)
- I have increased my professional network. (4)
- The money I have earned working has allowed me to stay enrolled in school. (5)
- I think more people will want to hire me after graduation because I have work experience. (6)
- I feel more connected to campus. (7)

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Block 2

Q18 This semester, approximately how many hours have you spent doing work for your classes each week (excluding time in class but including time spent in study groups, office hours, etc.)?
Please enter a number below.

Q19 This semester, approximately how many times have you gone to a professor's office hours?
Please enter a number below.

Q20 This semester, approximately how many times have you attended a campus event (such as a seminar or guest speaker event, a jobs fair, a play, a social event, etc.)? Please enter a number below.

Q21 This semester, approximately how many hours have you spent on-campus each week (including time spent in classes, studying, working, socializing, etc.)? Please enter a number below.

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 3

Q25 All students who complete the survey are eligible to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card from Vanderbilt University. To deliver the electronic gift card, the email used for this survey will be shared with the researchers. Your email address will not be connected to your survey responses or your identity in any other way. Would you like to receive this \$25 Amazon gift card?

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: All students who complete the survey are eligible to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card from Vanderbi... = Yes

T1 You will receive your \$25 Amazon gift card within the next ten days as a thank you for completing this survey. The card will come from a Vanderbilt University email address, so please check your spam folder. If you have any questions about the card, contact Adela Soliz (adela.r.soliz@vanderbilt.edu).

Q22 Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group to further explore your answers to the questions in this survey? Interview and focus group participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card as a thank you.

- No (0)
- Yes (1)

Display This Question If: Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group to further explore yo... = Yes

Q23 Please enter your preferred email for follow-up contact below:

Display This Question If: Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group to further explore yo... = Yes

Q24 Please re-enter your email address below:

End of Block: Block 3

T2 Thank you for taking this survey!

Please click the "Submit" button below to submit your survey.

Appendix C. Round 1 Interview Protocol for CUNY Administrators

Interviewer: Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us. In the next hour, I'm going to ask you a number of questions about the Federal Work-Study program at [insert institution name]. Not all of the questions may be applicable to your program, so our discussion may take less than an hour. Before we begin, I want to be clear that our purpose today is not to evaluate any of the work you've done; instead, we're simply seeking to understand and learn about your experience.

We sent you a copy of our consent form. Before we begin this interview, would you give your verbal consent to participate? Also, may we audio-record this interview?

Throughout this interview we will be asking you about the administration of the Federal Work-Study program. We recognize that many things about the program have been different this year as a result of the pandemic. In general, we are interested in what was "business as usual" before the pandemic, assuming that is what you think it will be once the health crisis is resolved. However, we will also ask you how your work has been different this year, and, in particular, if you think you will maintain some of the changes you made to your processes during the pandemic.

1. *[Start with general question about how the participant does or does not "interact with" the FWS program.]* Could you please start by telling us broadly about your role in administering the Federal Work-Study program. On a daily, weekly or monthly basis, what are you doing with the FWS program? *[How has this changed as a result of the pandemic?]*
2. We know from our work with the CUNY Office of Student Financial Aid that, after FWS funds are packaged centrally, funds that were rejected by students or that were offered to students who didn't enroll, etc., end up getting sent to campuses to distribute at their discretion. Is this correct?
3. How do you distribute these discretionary funds?
 - a. What is the goal of distributing the funds in this way?
 - b. *[Assuming their response to the previous question gets at either equity/efficiency/relative need, try to probe for how they think of the other principals:]*
 - i. How do you take into account students' relative need when distributing the discretionary funds?
 - ii. Why is this the most efficient way to distribute the discretionary funds?
 - iii. Why is this the most equitable way to distribute the discretionary funds?
 - c. How did you (and your colleagues) decide to distribute FWS funds in this way?
 - d. What conversations have you had about revising this process? *[If they have had conversations about revising this process, try to get at the underlying principle guiding these conversations]*
 - e. Could you tell me about a time when a decision was made that changed the way the program operated?

4. What other ways (besides central packaging, or the distribution process you just described) do students end up getting FWS offers or funds?
 - a. How has the distribution of discretionary funds been different during the pandemic?
5. What about the FWS program at your institution would you say works particularly well?
 - a. Can you think of any examples or tell me a story that demonstrates this success/problem with the FWS program at your institution?
6. Do you know of any particular policies at [institution name] related to the FWS program that are different from other campuses? In other words, what do you think is unique about your program?
 - a. Could you tell me a story or give me an example that would illustrate any of these unique qualities?
 - b. How did you all come to ["distribute the funds" or whatever action they are describing] in this way?
 - c. What are the benefits to ["distributing the funds" or whatever action they are describing] in this way?

[Come back to, is there anything that doesn't work particularly well here]

7. *[If haven't already been answering this question...]* What changes have you made to the administration of the FWS program as a result of the pandemic?
8. Which of the changes you have made to the administration of FWS as a result of the pandemic do you think you will continue after the crisis is resolved? Why?
9. Overall, would you consider the FWS program to be flexible to operate, or would you say that it is more regulated?
 - a. *[If more regulated]* How does the program being more regulated enhance or hinder your ability to administer the program?
 - b. Could you tell me a story about a time you felt that the existing regulation(s) made it difficult or made it easier for you as an administrator? *[If they bring up that the regulation of the program made it difficult to honor some principle, probe for that principle.]*
 - c. How did you navigate the regulation in that situation?
 - d. *[If less regulated]* How does the program being less regulated enhance or hinder your ability to administer the program?
 - e. Could you tell me a story about a time you felt that the flexibility made it difficult or made it easier for you as an administrator? *[If they bring up that the regulation of the program made it difficult to honor some principle, probe for that principle.]*
 - f. How did you navigate this flexibility in the situation to make decisions?

- 10.** What steps do you, and perhaps others in your office, take to stay up to date regarding the regulations surrounding FWS programming?
- Could you give me an example of a time when you learned about a new policy, and how you came to learn about it?
 - Have there been any moments where you weren't aware of a policy change or a regulation that it would have been helpful to know about sooner? If so, could you tell me more about that moment?
 - Could you describe any organized processes or training programs that the office sponsors to ensure that folks are up to date regarding FWS regulation?
- 11.** Is there anything else I should know in order to better understand what it's like as an administrator to make decisions around the FWS program at your institution?
- 12.** Is there anything else you would like to say or add before we conclude this interview? We are gathering data through snowball sampling. As a result we are asking everyone we interview who else they would recommend we speak to. Who else at your institution (or at other institutions) would you recommend we reach out to? *[State we will follow up via email for exact name, position, and contact info for recommended participant.]*

Interviewer: We want to be respectful of your time, but we learned a lot from this interview and really appreciate your candid responses to our questions. Just as a reminder, we will be following up in the coming year with some additional, more specific questions about the implementation and costs of the FWS program in the post-COVID period. We greatly appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this research.

Endnotes

- At CUNY, during the period of our study, students were eligible to receive FWS if they filed a FAFSA, indicated interest in work-study, had an EFC below \$1,500, had unmet need after all other grant aid was applied, and were not in any special programs, such as the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). We additionally limited our study sample to undergraduates.
- The FWS program is oversubscribed, so only a small percent of eligible students actually receive this form of aid. If we had sampled from the larger student population at our site, it would have greatly reduced the likelihood of having work-study students among our respondents.

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