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Subject: ASAP 25: On Curriculum Relevance
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“Curriculum Relevance,” the third goal in the [Academic and Student Affairs Plan 2025](#) (ASAP 25), is based on the idea that education should be relevant to students’ lives, interests, and cultural backgrounds,^[i] and that helping connect what they do and learn in school with the issues that concern their lives promotes academic motivation and achievement.^[ii]

At UW-Parkside, as in the literature, the meaning of *relevance* varies and connects to how we view the purposes of a four-year degree. Two broad points of view emerge.

The first emphasizes that a college education should further students’ career aspirations. This was evident in our 2016 survey of Academic Plan goals indicating that four of the six UW-Parkside constituent groups (students, instructional staff, non-instructional staff, and the other - senior administrators – group), placed the merged goals, “Build career knowledge and planning into curricula/Increase career relevance of programs,” among their top five priorities. This also aligns with results from national student surveys, one recent example from [Gallup](#), indicates 58 percent of respondents reported job and career outcomes as their primary motivation for going to college, true across all majors and demographic groups, and mentioned more than twice as frequently as the next most-cited reason.

The second, also emphasized in ASAP 25, is that a bachelor’s degree ought to emphasize the liberal arts as “a central, essential, and mission-based role of an undergraduate education at UW-Parkside” (p. 35). Surveys since 2007 by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have actually “identified common ground between educators and employers with respect to expectations for college-level learning... (and) are largely in agreement when it comes to the value of a contemporary liberal education—provided it is described using language that is common and accessible to both stakeholder groups.”^[iii] “Nine in ten employers believe that it is important to achieve the learning outcomes that define a contemporary liberal education,..(but) (o)nly six in ten say that recent graduates possess the knowledge and skills needed for success in entry-level positions at their companies or organizations.”

This should be a “both-and” proposition, right? A relevant higher education should balance the “career aspirations” *and* “liberal arts” purposes of an undergraduate degree.

Our previous [Academic Plan](#) (pp. 34-37) set out three strategies to enhance curriculum relevance: bolstering high-impact-practices, embedding career readiness into coursework, and strengthening learning and career outcomes assessments. We’ve made especially good progress on high impact practices (HIPs).

- A new course designation process was developed and implemented thus far for about 50 community-based learning (CBL) courses including required professional development and course design guidance.
- CBL learning assessment was revamped, new expectations established, and per-course funding was secured to support instructors doing this work.
- CBL Fellows funding was renewed and strengthened by incorporating an equity lens.
- A Faculty Director of Internships was appointed and the Guskin Center for Community and Business Engagement hired an Internship and Campus Employment Specialist.

- Campus-wide internship participation and practices were inventoried.
- A common definition for internships along with learning goals and essential course design elements were developed and approved by the Faculty Senate.
- A new internship workshop was launched for faculty and staff.
- Campus-wide student employment practices were inventoried.
- A “campus employment as HIPs” pilot was launched based on NACE competencies, including revised job descriptions and assessments, and supervisor supports.
- Freshman seminar 1-credit courses were expanded and implemented at scale in CNHS and in the Promise Plus Program.
- A HIPs in the General Education program initiative is underway that will expose additional lower division students to HIPs earlier in their degree programs, enhance engagement, and contribute to improved retention and graduation rates.
- A study we commissioned by the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions at UW-Madison found that, when UW-Parkside students are seeking work they do to afford their educations, they “overwhelmingly” and “proactively” seek “career-congruent” employment experiences. ^[iv] This helped catalyze the development of a new course by Theresa Castor to be offered this fall (highlighted in [Liberal Education](#)), UWP 294 – Work-Based Learning, essentially an internship for working students at their current work-sites, ^[v] that responds to the opportunity to use existing jobs as platforms for credit-worthy learning.

In sum, a mature CBL program has been strengthened, the foundations for the internship program bolstered, and new, rigorous (on- and off-campus) work-based learning opportunities for students have been created. Overall, about seven-in-ten students are experiencing two or more HIPs by graduation while noticeable equity gaps remain among Pell and students of color.

Looking ahead, [ASAP 25](#) (pp. 72-77) emphasizes several curriculum relevance priorities. We made less progress in two curriculum relevance areas from our last plan - embedding career readiness into coursework, and strengthening learning and career outcomes assessments – and we need to refocus on these. Considering the continuing decline in undergraduate enrollment described in my previous [note](#) and increasing questioning of the value of a four-year college degree, ASAP 25 includes a proposal to develop a new vision for an undergraduate education at UW-Parkside. Among the questions we may wish to consider, I suggest we ask:

- How can we make the content and delivery of our curriculum more inclusive so we continue to improve student success?
- How can we further embed career development knowledge and skills in students’ curricular and co-curricular experiences especially in the first year when attrition is highest?
- How can we further scale internships and on- and off-campus work experiences in the curriculum so they benefit more students?
- What should our course scheduling and program delivery modality mix be (e.g., face-to-face, hybrid, online) to meet the needs of more students?
- How can we better capture learning and career outcomes of an undergraduate education at UW-Parkside so we can better understand, improve, and communicate the value of a UW-Parkside degree?

To consider these and other questions, I plan to invite colleagues interested in developing a new vision for our undergraduate programs to join the effort this fall. If you are interested in participating, please let me know and thank you for reading this far.

- Rob

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[i] National Research Council: Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn. (2003). Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn. Washington, DC: National Archives Press.

[ii] Jeffrey R. Albrecht & Stuart A. Karabenick (2018) Relevance for Learning and Motivation in Education, The Journal of Experimental Education, 86:1, 1-10, DOI: 10.1080/00220973.2017.1380593.

[iii] How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most, Ashley Finley, AAC&U, 2021, p. iii.

Ibid, p. iv.

[iv] John Fischer, J., Hora, MT., Grinsfelder, M., Anaya, E. (2021) College Students at Work: Exploring the Career Development Experiences of Working Students at UW-Parkside in 2020. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[v] Patrick M. Green, Theresa Castor, Dale Leyburn, Don Demaria, and Andres Jaime Advocating for Experiential Learning Programs as Change Agents in Higher Education: Imagining a Justice Orientation that Centers Students and Partners while Enriching Practice (2022) "Full Special Issue, Part II," Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 1. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol5/iss1/1>