

# Study evaluates the influence of college experiences on career outcomes

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Meaningful college experiences, including internships and studying abroad, may not matter as much as your major and what school you attend when it comes to job satisfaction and earnings, according to research by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

"Our study adds important nuance to our understanding of the influence specific [college](#) experiences have on economic and attitudinal job outcomes in the years following [college graduation](#)," said Gregory Wolniak, director of the Center for Research on Higher Education Outcomes at NYU Steinhardt and the study's author. Wolniak presents his findings on April 18 with co-author Mark E. Engberg of Loyola University Chicago at the American Education Research Association's annual meeting.

Researchers have long been trying to answer the elusive question: Is college worth it? Previous studies have focused on the relationship between college education and earnings upon graduation, but much less is known about college's effect on non-monetary, attitudinal career outcomes.

A 2007 report from the Association of American Colleges & Universities highlighted a set of "high-impact" practices - such as internships, community-based learning, studying abroad, and research outside of the classroom - that cultivate the kinds of learning and development students need for success. Employers even seek college

graduates with these experiences, finding that they are better prepared for the workplace.

Wolniak and Engberg's study explores the connection between high-impact college experiences and career outcomes in the years immediately following college graduation, using 2012 follow up data from the Education Longitudinal Study, the most current and nationally representative data on students' transitions from college to the labor market.

The researchers analyzed a set of high-impact college experiences - internships, research outside of class, studying abroad, community-based projects, and senior capstones - in relationship to career outcomes immediately following graduation. While earlier research focused on earnings, this study looked at both earnings and non-monetary measures: graduates' attitudes toward their jobs (including a supportive work environment, job satisfaction, and job commitment) and continued learning and challenge in their jobs.

The results suggest that high-impact experiences have a relatively small and inconsistent influence on career outcomes in the years right after college graduation, and specific experiences seem to only predict certain outcomes.

For instance, internships and community-based projects appear to lead students into jobs that offer new challenges, serve a social purpose, and provide opportunities for continued learning. There was also a positive relationship between participating in a senior capstone experience and being employed in a supportive work environment. However, studying abroad was not related to any career outcomes, and none of the high-impact experiences measured affected job satisfaction or commitment.

Consistent with past studies, the researchers found that attending a

selective institution, rather than a moderate or inclusive institution, substantially improves earnings in the years immediately following college, with graduates of selective institutions reporting on average 16 to 18 percent higher earnings. However, a college's standing had no effect on attitudinal outcomes.

The researchers also found that college majors exert the largest effect on attitudinal measures, and also significantly influence early career earnings. While business majors enjoy comparable earnings to STEM majors, the former reported significantly lower levels of learning, satisfaction, and challenge on the job; in contrast, education majors earn substantially less than STEM majors but are more satisfied and committed to their jobs. In general, students working in jobs closely related to their majors reported more than 15 percent higher earnings.

"We had anticipated finding more consistent and stronger evidence that high-impact practices have a positive influence on earnings and other aspects of career success," Wolniak said. "Our findings suggest that to earn more and enjoy the attitudinal outcomes we examined, students would benefit from support in securing jobs related to their majors."

The researchers said that these results should not be used to call into question the importance of high-impact college experiences in terms of student learning and development, but do recommend using caution before suggesting that the positive influence high-impact experiences have on learning will translate to career gains.

Provided by New York University

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