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Work-Integrated Learning Special Section

What Does "Work" Mean to First-Generation Students? Emerging Identities in WIL Narratives

ABSTRACT

The impacts of work-integrated learning (WIL) on first-generation students are mixed. WIL can help first-generation students gain the social, cultural, and human capital needed to succeed in the workplace, capital possessed by their continuing-generation peers; yet the equity-deserving status of many first-generation students may create barriers to accessing WIL obstacles to completing WIL, and even negative relationships between participating in WIL and securing a job. Given this lack of consensus, we argue for more research on first-generation students that highlights student voices. Building on studies exploring first-generation students' perceptions of higher education as well as recent scholarship on students' reflections of work quality in WIL, we explore how they see "work" in WIL contexts and negotiate intersecting identities. By examining students' "workview," a framework from Designing Your Life that applies design thinking principles to life and career development, this study illuminates how these students navigate "cultural scripts"—the expectations and realities of WIL environments—and negotiate multifaceted identities. We compare cultural scripts about work between first-generation and continuing-generation students and explore how identity negotiation within WIL reshapes these scripts.

KEYWORDS

first-generation, work-integrated learning, identity negotiation, cultural scripts, agency

INTRODUCTION

> It's been a hard week. It was hard because I never really had loss in my life. I just went to the bathroom and cried. Originally, I was like, "Okay, well, it's two o'clock, I only have three more hours." But, I just couldn't do it. I ended up telling them I can't be here anymore. Part of me felt like I was quitting, well, not quite "quitting," but like I was giving up. So, for me to leave early felt like I was letting people down. I didn't really have anything to do, but I still felt like I was letting people down even though I wasn't doing anything.
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> —Sandra Scott, Intern, Excerpt from Interview Transcript

Sandra Scott is a first-generation college student who participated in an internship placement as part of her undergraduate studies. Sandra received a call from her mother while at her internship about the death of her great-grandmother. She experienced intense guilt over losing composure at work and for her inability to complete the last three hours of her shift. This guilt reflects cultural scripts—implicit, culturally specific expectations and norms that guide behavior within particular

social or organizational contexts (Gioia and Poole 1984; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004; Hora and Lee 2023). Having to leave work early feels like "giving up" because work is a necessity for self-improvement and relationship maintenance.

Her internship experience challenged these cultural scripts. "They've been really understanding," Sandra shared about her co-workers. "I really appreciate working for people who understand me and that are able to give me time off while I'm going through this. I'd much rather work in a place that cares about my mental health and about me as a person rather than just a position." The new cultural scripts for work that Sandra encountered revised the cultural scripts she brought to her internship—assumptions about work as purely task-oriented, hierarchical, or externally defined—prompting her to develop a different relationship to the work of her internship and resulting in a higher quality WIL experience.

For many students today, especially first-generation students, the meaning of "work" is complex, emotionally charged, and deeply shaped by cultural expectations tied to identity, family obligation, self-worth, and future aspirations. In WIL programs, these meanings become pronounced as students navigate both educational and professional contexts, often for the first time. Yet despite the centrality of work to students' academic journeys, we know little about how first-generation students understand work and negotiate conflicting cultural expectations around it.

Much WIL scholarship focuses on assessing program effectiveness or facilitating student pre-professionalization—equipping students to assimilate into existing professional norms. This assimilationist framework assumes the neutrality of dominant workplace norms while overlooking the diverse backgrounds that students, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, bring to WIL settings. This risks positioning students as deficient rather than recognizing them as contributors with valuable perspectives. Moreover, student voices remain underrepresented in WIL scholarship, often limited to reflective exercises for programmatic assessment rather than substantive data that offers insights into lived experiences.

Reframing perceived generational challenges as cultural scripts offers a more nuanced framework for understanding WIL experiences. Rather than viewing differences as deficits to be corrected, this perspective recognizes diverse, contextually embedded ways individuals understand and enact "work." Drawing on student authorship theory (Baxter Magolda 2007), we understand students as active agents who author their own identities through reflection, adaptation, and meaning-making within WIL experiences, instead of passive recipients of workplace norms.

Our project, supported by the Research Seminar on Work-Integrated Learning, facilitated by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University explores how first-generation students understand work by describing the cultural scripts present in their understanding, how these differ from continuing-generation students, and how first-generation students position themselves in relation to dominant scripts. We call for making cultural scripts visible and flexible for all students, ending with concrete pedagogical interventions that can help surface cultural scripts in WIL contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current scholarship on identity in WIL focuses on how WIL experiences help students develop professionalism (the competencies and skills expected of a professional) and professional identities (the set of characteristics that define a person as a member of a specific profession). Early scholarship often assumed professional identity developed automatically by virtue of university course enrollment in general and WIL experiences in particular (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012). More recent research has worked to engage students, faculty, and supervisors in reflection in order to make professional identity development a more visible outcome of WIL. Based on a case study of two

professional entry courses, Trede (2012) calls for three critical principles to become foundational for critical WIL curricula: 1) problematizing the transition from school to work, which is often anything but smooth; 2) generating discourse about professionalism and professional identity; and 3) building capacity in students to ask inquisitive questions (165–66). Bowen's (2018) study of 12 interns found that WIL often fosters a "divided self" as students attempt to develop a professional image while not compromising their sense of self. To help students reconcile such "inside/outside selves" (1155), Bowen references Schön's (1983) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as a way of increasing attention to reflection in WIL (2018, 1156). In addition, Bowen calls for WIL facilitators to create spaces for students to "try on" or experiment with different professional identities (1157).

Professionalism in WIL is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of successful WIL experiences. Recent literature considers demonstration of a range of skills, which are often termed as "soft skills" or "21st century skills," such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, decision making, and adaptability; these are critical for integrating theoretical knowledge and practical experience for students and, thus, their successful integration into professional environments (Billett 2001; Jackson 2015; Jackson and Wilton 2016; Smith, Ferns, Russell, and Cretchley 2014). Professionalism is not just about individual competencies but also involves the ability to engage with organizational cultures, contribute to a team effectively, and thereby embody/enact professional identities. Accordingly, WIL scholars advocate for aligning WIL programs with industry expectations in order to help students foster their professional identities marked by these "soft skills." These sets of shared norms, values, and behaviors are "cultural scripts" that guide an individual's actions and interactions within a specific cultural context. It represents the accepted patterns of behavior that are considered appropriate or typical within a particular culture (Wierzbicka 1994). By providing a framework for making sense of one's roles and responsibilities, cultural scripts help individuals structure sequences of expected behaviors, actions, and interactions in organizational settings (Gioia et al. 1984; Vanclay and Enticott 2011).

Following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's (1977) work on the production and reproduction of cultural capital (non-economic assets such as tastes, skills, attitudes, and behaviors) within educational settings, scholars have called attention to the cultural and ideological aspects of teaching and learning professionalism as scripts that are specific to cultural practices in workplaces, organizations, and industries (Hora 2016; Hora, Benbow, and Smolarek 2018). Complicating the concept and development of professional identity, scholars have investigated how the cultural identity of students influences students' experiences and outcomes in WIL placements (Chatoor and Balata 2023; O'Shea 2014, 2015; Reid and Dawes 2022). Moss and Tilly (1996), for example, examined challenges faced by Black men in demonstrating "soft skills" that often reflect white normativity in communication and interpersonal interactions and thus impact employment outcomes. Nielsen, Livernoche, and Ramji (2022) investigated the unique challenges faced by Indigenous students, including cultural dissonance, a lack of cultural understanding from employers, and difficulties balancing cultural obligations with work demands.

Some studies found that WIL helped students develop the linguistic, social, navigational, and resistance capital required to succeed in the workplace, capital that their continuing-generation counterparts often already possessed (Yosso 2005). National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data demonstrate that exposure to WIL improves the retention rates of Black students while Hispanic students see improvement in first-year GPA (Finley and McNair 2013, xii). Looking specifically at equity-deserving groups and complementing quantitative NSSE data with qualitative focus groups, Finley and McNair found WIL to significantly impact first-generation students when barriers to access were removed. First-generation students reported increased levels of engagement in deep learning

and perceived gains, which increased even more depending on the amount of WIL experienced (Finley et al. 2013). Additionally, looking specifically at how WIL impacts the transition to the labor market, Wyonch (2020) found that engagement in WIL can reduce wage and employment gaps.

In contrast, other WIL scholarships suggest that the equity-deserving status of many first-generation students negatively impacted their WIL experiences. For example, Moylan and Wood (2016) surveyed social work students about sexual harassment in their WIL placement. They noted that social work is often a gendered profession with 90% of their 515 respondents identifying as women. Survey responses indicated that 55% experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in their WIL experience, with 63% reporting they experienced multiple forms (Moylan et al. 2016). Put simply, students experience barriers to the benefits of WIL if their safety is threatened. This finding aligns with broader scholarship that highlights the structural, social, and institutional obstacles students may face in completing WIL (Canadian Heritage 2022; Cocks and Thoresen 2013; Patton, Harper, and Harris 2015).

Cocks et al.'s (2013) mixed methods study of WIL students with disabilities demonstrates how an equity-deserving status can create barriers to completing WIL. Students with disabilities reported that a lack of resources, from poor wages and cost of tools to lack of time and transportation difficulties, impacted their ability to complete WIL (Cocks et al. 2013). Similar to Moylan et al.'s study, participants also referenced harassment and bullying (Cocks et al. 2013). Finally, participants indicated challenges in the environment, including difficulty accessing workspace, lack of understanding and empathy from WIL supervisors and employees, and social exclusion (Cocks et al. 2013). Despite research that demonstrates the benefits of strong collaborative relationships between accessibility services and WIL sites, only 5% of participants indicated strong support from both spaces, suggesting a need for more communication and connection between the university and employers (Cocks et al. 2013, 8).

Finally, contrary to scholarship that demonstrates a positive relationship between WIL and employment outcomes (Bist, Mehta, Mehta, and Meghrajani 2020; Coker, Heiser, Taylor, and Book 2017; Jackson and Bridgstock 2021), Cassandra Kepple's (2023) recent dissertation found a significant negative relationship between WIL participation and securing a job for first-generation students and underrepresented minorities. Kepple explores poor WIL implementation, from lack of authentic reflection and inconsistent implementation to poor network building and communication between stakeholders, as potential reasons for this negative relationship. More importantly, Kepple highlights the possibility of poor student experiences resulting from equity-deserving status markers. While Kepple's quasi-experiment does not allow her to definitively tease out why her study indicated a negative relationship between WIL and employment for first-generation students, her findings suggest a need to rethink much of the capital-gain theories that dominate the scholarship of first-generation students (Main, Johnson, Ramirez, Ohland, and Groll 2020; NCES 2019; NSSE 2021).

Thus, we call attention to the experiences of first-generation students in WIL for a number of reasons. First-generation student enrollment continues to grow, and WIL practices need to be sensitive to the identities of these students. As Eady, Drewery, Burney, Li, and Livingstone (2024) highlight in their systematic review, existing frameworks often overlook the unique perspectives of students, whose reflections on work-integrated learning (WIL) quality provide invaluable insights into program effectiveness and relevance. This is particularly crucial for marginalized groups, such as first-generation college students, who may have distinct needs and challenges, as underscored by Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004). Their research demonstrates that for first-generation students, engaging in college experiences that are tailored to their unique circumstances may significantly enhance academic success and personal development. Learning about students'

definitions of work, where those definitions come from, and how those definitions impact identity negotiation in WIL from student voices can facilitate WIL experience design that is more sensitive to their needs. Such strength-based approaches can help us problematize deficit approaches to capital-theory scholarship, helping us understand first-generation students and their contributions to WIL in more complex ways (O'Shea 2014, 2015; Patton et al. 2015, Yosso 2005). Finally, examining how first-generation students negotiate their identity can trouble the strong emphasis on developing professional identity in WIL scholarship. Drawing from these WIL studies, we seek to underscore and amplify student voices, offering insights for not only enriching program quality but also addressing systemic inequities. This helps ensure that educational outcomes are inclusive and impactful for all learners.

RESEARCH METHODS

Context of study

We developed this research project's design during a three-year research seminar on work-integrated learning by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University. Bowling Green State University granted a cross-institutional IRB approval. For the research, we developed and distributed a digital survey to students enrolled in four private and public institutions in Canada and the United States; most of the data came from students at Bowling Green State University.

Soliciting workviews via surveys

To gain insights into how first-generation students understand and conceptualize the notion of work within the context of work-integrated learning experiences, we gathered data through surveys that included a writing task. Specifically, as part of the survey, we adapted the "workview" activity developed by the Life Design Lab at Stanford University. After defining "workview," the survey asked participants to "reflect on what work means to you (and perhaps what you hope it means for others as well). We're looking for a paragraph that addresses some of the questions below." Some of those questions included: Why do you work? What is work for? What does work mean? What defines good or worthwhile work? The narratives of work produced by the survey aligned with Baxter Magolda's (2014) theory of self-authorship in terms of its developmental perspective, emphasis on personal agency, meaning making through reflection, and recognition of external influences at play as a part of one's self-construction/narrative reflection.

We administered the survey electronically to students enrolled in Canadian Mennonite University, Bowling Green State University, Columbus State University, and Washington and Lee University. The survey instructed participants to provide honest and reflective responses, along with their demographic information, including age, gender, race, first-generation status, birthplace of participants and participant's parents, and major/minor. We surveyed both first- and continuing-generation in order to learn the differences between them. We defined a first-generation student as a student whose parents or guardians did not obtain a four-year bachelor's degree.

Workview coding

Of 51 workviews we received, 40 were from first-generation and 11 were from continuing-generation students. We anonymized responses and coded for cultural scripts, i.e. a foundational context through which students understand themselves and what it means to "work."

Initial collaborative coding process

During the initial coding session held during one of the WIL Research Seminar meetings at Elon University, we read through all workviews multiple times in order to familiarize ourselves with

the data. We then selected the first workview, read it aloud as a team, and discussed the cultural scripts present. Following this initial analysis, we collaboratively read and coded additional workviews until no new cultural script codes emerged. This process yielded 21 initial cultural scripts, for which we then created a codebook with definitions for each code.

Individual coding phase

After establishing our initial codebook, we divided the remaining workviews equally among research team members and coded them individually using the 21 identified cultural scripts.

Consensus building and code refinement

Before the WIL Research Seminar meeting, we reconvened to discuss our individual coding of the workviews. Through this collaborative discussion, we refined our code definitions and consolidated our findings, leading to a final codebook of 14 cultural scripts. We then recoded all workview samples using our refined codebook and the same collaborative process described above.

Final coding round

Each workview received a second round of coding that drew upon our finalized codebook of 14 cultural scripts. Our participants' relationships to these scripts weren't neutral. Therefore, during this second round of coding, we also applied a secondary code to each primary code: affiliate or resist. Sometimes, their stories strongly supported a cultural script. Other times, they pushed against cultural scripts. Some workviews even manifested a more complicated relationship in which a single workview affiliated with and resisted a specific script. This dual coding approach illuminated participants' agency in narrating their view on work. Participants' positioning relative to the cultural scripts demonstrates the dynamic and interactive nature of identity formation in negotiating the complexity of internal and external imperatives and desires (Davies and Harré 1990).

RESULTS

In this section, we share the most frequent cultural scripts in the workviews for both first- and continuing-generation students. We then highlight the ways cultural scripts differed between first- and continuing-generation students. We then examine how first-generation students' identity work within their workviews.

Cultural script frequency

An analysis of the collected workviews revealed five dominant cultural scripts among undergraduate students, listed in order of frequency: necessity, transaction, self-fulfillment, impact on society, and self-improvement. These cultural scripts reflect underlying socio-cultural norms and expectations that influence how students perceive, negotiate, and construct the meaning of "work." While these cultural scripts intersect and overlap with each other as part and parcel of narrating students' workviews, we examine each cultural script individually in order to explore their distinct influences on students' perceptions of work.

Cultural script #1: Necessity

"I work because that is what is required in life," a student stated in a workview, encapsulating the cultural script of necessity. Of 51 students, 33 emphasized that work is essential for sustaining oneself and society—an obligation shaped by economic realities and societal expectations. This necessity stems from diverse sources, including upbringing, socioeconomic influences, and racial/cultural identity. One student reflected, "My parents raised me to believe that work is

something you want to enjoy but also a necessity." Others linked work to navigating systemic barriers, as another wrote "My race and gender, along with socioeconomic status, shape my view of work as a necessity, not an option. I know any job I take will likely involve racial discrimination, so I prioritize my choices carefully."

Beyond external imperatives, students' motivations and aspirations also frame work as necessary. One explained, "Work means time and dedication. I work because I have goals to achieve. To get what I want, I must put in the time and effort." Whether for financial stability, skill development, or contributing to society, many students viewed work as a necessary path to personal fulfillment.

Cultural script #2: Transaction

"I see working as a required process in life," wrote one student. Closely tied to necessity, work as a transaction emerged as another cultural script. For 26 students, work was primarily a means to an end—an exchange for financial compensation. One stated, "I work to make money. It's how you survive and find happiness." This view frames work as labor exchanged for rewards like experience, skills, or money. Many described work as a "job" or "task," regardless of personal fulfillment.

This script often reflected a disconnect between work and satisfaction. One student noted, "Work is a tool that provides the means to purchase necessities. Ideally, it could also express oneself or impact the world." Others were more critical, with one writing, "Work keeps people down. Many must endure hard jobs with inadequate pay, which is terrible." This script highlighted tensions between the transactional nature of work and its broader societal implications.

Cultural script #3: Self-Fulfillment

"Personally, I work because it is what I love to do. I couldn't sit idle every day without a purpose," shared a student working as a nanny. For 24 students, work provided purpose and meaning, animating the script of self-fulfillment. This emphasizes finding happiness and alignment with personal passions and values. A student recalled unpaid high school work in India that broke routine and offered satisfaction.

This script connects work to self-worth and personal growth. For these students, work transcended financial necessity, fostering integrity, dignity, and fulfillment. One student reflected, "When we work for others, whether for money or another reason, shared values must apply. My aim is fulfillment because that's where my happiness lies." Aligning work with personal values transforms it into a vital component of growth and satisfaction.

Cultural script #4: Impact society

"Work is a way I can contribute to society—whether for an employer, family, or myself," wrote a student who identified as a "lower middle-class woman." For 19 students, work supported the betterment of a group, community, or society. One stated, "I seek satisfaction from contributing to something greater than myself."

This script highlights work as more than personal gain—it's about making a difference. Another noted, "If more people enjoyed work, society would be more productive." This cultural script links work to community and societal impact, providing students with a sense of purpose and agency in driving change.

Cultural script #5: Self-Improvement

"To me, worthwhile work improves life—for yourself or others," shared a criminal justice major. For 17 students, work was a vehicle for personal growth, skill acquisition, and overcoming

challenges. One wrote, "I worked hard through school and jobs, graduating early and paying for my education. Work means feeling proud of overcoming challenges."

This script centers on improvement beyond monetary gain. A student shared, "Work provides experience and skills like collaboration and understanding diverse perspectives." Work offers direction, linking students' past and present circumstances to personal development and future goals.

Differences between first- and continuing-generation students

These cultural scripts demonstrate a sophisticated variety in how students understand the interplay between cultural scripts and their beliefs about work. They also provide valuable insights into how cultural scripts inform students' experience of "work" in work-integrated learning. We observed that first-generation students' perception of work deeply informs how they talk about themselves and their WIL experiences.

1. First-generation students demonstrated a strong consciousness of the impact of individual and systemic oppression on their own and societal understandings of work in comparison to continuing-generation students.

One student revealed a concern of having a safe workplace as a LGBTQ+ individual, questioning the pervasive discrimination in workplaces. Another student, identifying as a white woman, said, "being white is most of the golden ticket in America sadly, but if you're a white man that's when you win. If you are anything other than a white man you have to work extra hard to get taken seriously no matter what you do or how much you care about work." Additionally, a student reflected on gender disparities, citing the financial burden of the "pink tax" and the necessity of surpassing their parents' socio-economic status to ensure financial stability. Together, these insights illustrate a nuanced understanding of how their perceptions of systemic oppression impacts the ways in which students view work and narrate their sense of self in relation to it.

Interestingly, among 14 students who discussed the impact of individual and systemic oppression, only two were continuing-generation students. One explanation for this heightened awareness is, as Pew Research Center (2021) reports, first-generation students often carry the weight of their family's economic experiences, which can lead to a more critical and informed understanding of systemic issues like oppression and inequality in the workforce. In parallel with an acute awareness of individual and systemic oppression and how these impact students' understandings of and engagement with work, an additional theme quickly rose to the surface.

2. First-generation students demonstrated strong affiliation with their families and communities, highlighting the ways in which work and career development impact and inform their collective and shared identities.

For example, one student discussed that her family is a significant motivator to her work in general and why she chose to attend university as the first person in her family:

> I also have five younger siblings, and I really hope to set a good example for my brothers and sister. It is important to me to know that they have a person to look up to and learn about determination and have someone to turn to when they need advice.

In addition to being an example of what is possible within an individual family, another student highlighted that "work is for the community and it keeps everything running," linking this to her identity as a "Mexican woman" and the awareness that "my being reflects on others who are like me," which although it can be a significant pressure, is also a motivator because of the "hope" people have in her and that she can provide. Repeated reference to themselves in relation to their families and communities in this kind of reciprocal way was very common to the first-generation students' workviews; these themes were not invoked by continuing-generation students, even when these workviews also referenced family.

In contrast, continuing-generation students' workviews were primarily organized around three cultural scripts: transaction, self-fulfillment, and necessity. The transaction script appeared frequently in their discussions of work as an exchange—effort for compensation, skills for advancement, or education for career opportunities. Many continuing-generation students emphasized the self-fulfillment script, viewing work as a means of personal growth and individual satisfaction, focusing on work that provides accomplishment and aligns with personal passions. The necessity script also emerged prominently, with continuing-generation students acknowledging practical realities of needing income for survival and paying bills. Notably, these scripts focus primarily on individual concerns—personal exchange, individual fulfillment, and personal financial needs—rather than the collective and community-oriented perspectives that characterized first-generation students' workviews. This difference suggests that continuing-generation students may have the privilege to view work through a more individualistic lens, while first-generation students' experiences with systemic barriers create a more collective and critically conscious approach to work.

Negotiating affiliation and resistance: How students do identity work in their written workviews

Given the complexity of "work" as a concept, the 51 workviews we collected were similarly complex. Regardless of length, each workview referenced multiple cultural scripts. Because of our interest in self-authorship, we analyzed the workviews from a discourse analytical perspective, examining not only the scripts themselves but also how students positioned themselves relative to cultural scripts. What emerged was a complex ecosystem of interconnected ideas, with students negotiating this complexity in sophisticated and creative ways—both affiliating with and resisting cultural scripts, sometimes within the same phrase or workview.

Our analysis revealed three distinct patterns in how students related to cultural scripts in their workviews. Given the prompts students responded to (e.g., "What is work for?" "What does work mean?"), some workviews invoked only cultural scripts with which the student affiliated. The majority of workviews, however, contained scripts that students affiliated with and ones they resisted. A third group demonstrated additional complexity, with students oscillating between affiliating with and resisting the same cultural scripts. This pattern appeared particularly prevalent in first-generation student workviews that referenced cultural scripts surrounding oppression—both individual and systemic—as students negotiated agency and oppression in their writing.

To illustrate these patterns, we provide several examples that focus on workviews explicitly referencing students' identities, as these best demonstrate the negotiation of identities within contexts of affiliation and resistance. We begin with an example containing only affiliative stances toward cultural scripts, then present examples showing mixed affiliation and resistance, and finally examine workviews highlighting tensions where students both affiliate with and resist the same scripts.

We begin with a workview that invokes five different cultural scripts in a few sentences and affiliates with all of them.

> I work to pay my bills and to cover [*sic*] cost of gas coming to and from school. I am Mexican and we view work [*sic*] a privilege to be able to contribute to society and provide for our families.

Specifically, the student invokes the following cultural scripts—necessity "I work to pay my bills and to cover the cost of gas," self-improvement "to and from school," impact society "contribute to society", impact family "provide for our families," and self-fulfillment "work [*sic*] a privilege." The student affiliates with all of these scripts and additionally gives us an anchor for why these scripts matter to them; they explicitly reference their ethnic identity "I am Mexican" and link this identity to their understanding of the purpose of work. Additionally, while they explicitly positions themself as a student, in our data, participants did not tend to make the "first-generation" aspect of their identities relevant, rather focusing, like in this example, on their racial or ethnic identity, their gender, or sexual orientation.

In the next several examples, we will analyze the ways in which students negotiate tensions in the cultural scripts they invoke through affiliating and resisting them:

> I work because I want to feel accomplished. Work is the reason people get up and continue to get up. Work means to me what can I do to make myself and only myself feel proud. It can relate to others because everyone wants to feel that. Most don't because they find themself working for only the money. They don't enjoy what they do everyday. What defines good and worthwhile work is waking up excited and eager to get the day started. Money can have a lot to do with it, because everyone has bills to pay. But, if you're doing the work you love the money is just a bonus. Experience, growth, and fulfillment has everything to do with it. The more you experienced the more you know, the more you know the more you'll grow, and the more you grow, the more fulfillment you'll feel from your job. My various identities don't play a lot into it. I am a white woman and being white is most of the golden ticket in America sadly, but if you're a white man that's when you win. If you are anything other than a white man, you have to work extra hard to get taken seriously no matter what you do or how much you care about work.

In this workview, the student starts by invoking self-fulfillment, both for herself "I want to feel accomplished" as well as for people in general "work is the reason people get up." She emphasizes her affiliation with the self-fulfillment script by repeating "what can I do to make myself and only myself feel proud," thus linking accomplishment and pride closely in how she constructs self-fulfillment. She clearly positions herself as not primarily motivated by money, and thus different from "most people," whom she perceives as affiliating with the transaction script "most don't because they find themself working only for the money." Enjoyment, and thus motivation, play a significant role in this student's construction of work. It's also interesting how she positions herself (and people who enjoy their work) as having agency and choice compared to others who "find themself" doing unfulfilling work.

The participant then contradicts herself by invoking the necessity script: "money can have a lot to do with it because we all have bills to pay." Her shift from "you" to "we" signals her affiliation

with this script—she now includes herself among those for whom money matters in work decisions. However, she immediately resists this stance in her next sentence: "If you're doing work you love, the money is just a bonus," returning to the idea that money should be secondary to passion.

The last tension highlighted in this workview is this student's negotiation of her racial and gender identities. She begins by stating that her "various identities don't play a lot into it," and then immediately proceeds to invoke scripts of systemic and individual oppression, by discussing the fact that her whiteness gives her significant privilege when it comes to work "being white is the most golden ticket in America," and then acknowledging that as a woman, "you have to work extra hard to get taken seriously, no matter what you do or how much you care about work."

In this workview, the writer bounces between resisting and affiliating with the necessity script and threading various aspects of self-fulfillment throughout. She closes by positioning herself as not having identities that are relevant to how she perceives work and then goes on to detail the ways in which two of her identities profoundly impact her understanding of work, her agency, and her experience of oppression. These tensions highlight the challenges of living in a world that simultaneously asks us to be productive members of society and find work that is purposeful and can be monetized.

The following workview picks up several of the same cultural scripts as the previous example, but structures things differently in terms of which scripts are resisted and emphasized in relation to the identities that the student constructs.

> Work primarily means making money to live, because the things are defined as "work" that I enjoy doing is not classified as work to me. I have been working in retail and customer service jobs my entire life, and I am studying to be able to stop doing that for work and make my actual job something I enjoy. I want fulfillment from my work. Being LGBTQ+ makes work harder to find and feel safe in the environments I find myself in. I believe work should equal among all coworkers if in a team workplace, and if it is more of an individual workplace, I believe work should be no more than what you are paid to do.

The student begins by invoking the cultural script of work as necessity by stating that "work primarily means making money to live," and expands on that by resisting the framing of enjoyment of work even being possible: "things are defined as 'work' that I enjoy doing is [*sic*] not classified as work to me." The student then goes on to provide examples of jobs that they do consider work, namely "retail and customer service jobs," that align with the cultural script of necessity because they are a means to an end. The student explicitly positions themselves as a student and constructs education as a means to an end—namely to be able to "stop doing that for work and make my actual job something I enjoy."

The conflation of work with job is notable in this passage, since the student oscillates between invoking strong affiliation with the work as necessity script before explaining that the reason they are studying is so that they can do work that they "[do] not classif[y] as work" for their "actual job." Constructing jobs and work in opposition to one another blurs the line between affiliation to and resistance of the cultural script of necessity. The student then follows up with the statement "I want fulfillment from my work," thus invoking the self-fulfillment script more explicitly than earlier in the workview. The first time the self-fulfillment script appears in the workview, the student resists it, but in a surprising way, since they initially resist the construction of work as anything other than transactional necessity. However, the explicit statement about the importance of fulfillment marks a

shift in the student's positioning, as they affiliate strongly with how important purpose is for them within their own work life.

The strong affiliation with wanting purpose and fulfillment is immediately followed by an explicit reference to their queer identity, which invokes both systemic and individual oppression within the same sentence: "being LGBTQ makes work harder to find and feel safe in the environments I find myself in." The fluctuating agency in this sentence is relevant here, as the student first makes a general statement about the challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals in securing work (systemic oppression), and then personalizes it by talking about the challenge of finding safety in their own work environments. Notable is the passive language—while finding work is an active verb phrase, it is still dependent on being hired, a passive construction that does not allow the individual any agency. This is extended in the statement about "environments I find myself in," and this passive construction effectively positions the student as having no agency in achieving safety in work environments. This reading certainly aligns with the employment statistics of queer and especially trans youth in North America (American Progress 2023).

The student closes their workview with two seemingly contradictory sentences that reveal underlying tension. First, they advocate for equitable teamwork: "I believe work should be equal among all coworkers." Then they connect individual workplace autonomy with work-life boundaries. These sentences invoke conflicting cultural scripts—belonging (emphasizing team equity) and working to live (prioritizing individual boundaries).

However, this apparent contradiction makes sense, given how the student centers their experience of workplace oppression due to their queer identity. By invoking both scripts, they outline two essential needs: belonging through equitable treatment ("equal among coworkers") and self-protection through boundaries ("no more than what you get paid to do"). Together, these scripts represent an ideal work environment where the student can be safe and belong, as well as a coping strategy when that ideal isn't achievable. This combination resists dominant neoliberal and capitalist scripts by asserting that work should not define the individual while emphasizing that workplace community matters for safety and support.

Recommendations for designing WIL sensitive to the needs of first-generation students

Just like all students, first-generation students bring cultural scripts about work, professionalism, and themselves as a worker to their understanding of their education in general and work-integrated learning experiences in particular. Given the mixed results in terms of the impact of WIL on first-generation, we would like to propose several approaches that could be implemented at various levels of WIL experience design and implementation that center the strengths that first-generation students bring to their educational experiences. We will propose some practical suggestions that can be implemented by faculty advisors at the level of student-faculty interactions, some for implementation at the course or program level at individual institutions, and some of the implications for the project of WIL as a whole.

Faculty/student interaction level

To begin, let's imagine a student like Sandra, a first-generation student who has very specific ideas about work, work ethic, her role as a worker, and her perception of what kinds of work education can make possible for her. Not having had an opportunity to unpack the cultural scripts operating on this perception means she unquestioningly brings those cultural scripts into her internship experience, resulting in guilt and surprise when she becomes understandably emotional

when she receives news at work about a family death. At this initial level, we propose that academic mentors work with students individually and in groups to surface the cultural scripts that shape their understandings of work. Once students are aware of the cultural scripts that shape their assumptions and beliefs, mentors can facilitate discussion about where those assumptions come from and that they are not universal. Mentors can suggest that the work environments that students enter for the WIL placements may well operate based on completely different cultural scripts than the students possess.

While all students can learn from the surfacing of cultural scripts that shape their understandings, first-generation students benefit in particular, since their understanding of work has been shaped by significantly different kinds of work than their peers or the kinds of work they do in WIL placements. Rather than framing this difference as a deficit, we encourage the interrogation of cultural scripts within the framework of Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth.

Based on our research, first-generation students' conceptions of work align with several forms of capital that serve to constitute cultural wealth. For example, first-generation students invoke community and relationship as primary cultural scripts, aligning with categories of familial and social capital. More interestingly, the prevalence of future-orientation in their workviews aligns with aspirational capital, while the variety of ways they invoke individual and systemic oppression aligns with the category of resistant capital.

Faculty mentors should consider the ways in which first-generation students bring these forms of capital to bear in a context where these forms are often perceived through a deficit lens. Reflective writing and discussion on questions beyond employability are essential. For example, mentors can ask:

1. What can first-generation students, with a community-focused orientation, teach continuing-generation students about how WIL in particular but education in general can be framed?
2. What happens when we problematize an understanding of WIL primarily as a pathway to employability, and expand our understanding to allow for a variety of ways of negotiating future pathways and the role that work can play?
3. How can we support students in developing the flexibility to recognize and analyze their cultural scripts and recognize and analyze the cultural scripts in the various environments they move through?

In terms of specific interventions that would allow mentors to engage with these questions, we recommend raising discussions about cultural scripts well before the student moves into placement. Collaboratively exploring cultural scripts that govern understandings of work and success and then considering which ones might be helpful and supportive or harmful and misinformed is a good way to set students up to notice the differences in the expectations their cultural scripts create for them. Checking in regularly about how they see cultural scripts at play—if they are learning new ones, they are questioning their old ones, or they are finding confirmation for some of the scripts they hold—will help build the necessary flexibility to navigate the tensions between cultural scripts in a particular WIL experience, as well as in other professional experiences as they go forward.

Program level

This orientation—not only toward employability but also toward the possibility of mutual shaping to occur—has implications at both the course and program level, potentially necessitating a review of how program outcomes are measured. In WIL literature, success is often measured based on the type of employment a former WIL student has acquired and their entry level salary. Broader learning outcomes at the course level, and possibly at the program level, should include the

development of the ability to identify and analyze cultural scripts. This skillset could be conceptualized as being part of career development and management and should be clearly articulated and taught. Teaching it explicitly benefits all students and allows useful interrogation of the cultural scripts at play at the university as well.

We also recommend including host organizations and supervisors in surfacing their cultural scripts so these can be made clear to students. WIL students are students, which means they are in the process of learning, even while they bring new ideas, enthusiasm, and a collection of skills. Expecting students to understand what "professionalism" means in any given context is unrealistic, and we would argue, unfair, given the cultural scripts students are working with. Educating hosts through webinars or handbooks about the differences in cultural scripts—particularly those shaping Gen Z's understanding of work and the beliefs of students from equity-deserving groups—can create clearer expectations on both sides and help shift how organizations and instructors perceive students from particular backgrounds.

CONCLUSIONS: LOOKING FORWARD

WIL is a high impact practice with significant potential for student engagement, academic achievement, and, especially for first-generation students, an opportunity to develop the cultural capital necessary to manage the school-to-work transition well. Kepple's (2023) research, which challenges an overly optimistic view of the potential of WIL for first-generation students, is crucial as we re-examine pedagogical and administrative practices in order to address barriers to access. In particular, Kepple calls us to attend to factors including framing and teaching critical reflection, designing WIL experiences thoughtfully, and engaging collaboratively about WIL possibilities. The complexity of factors at play in WIL can make it difficult to tease out exactly which aspects have an impact where.

We contend that starting from student voice and student identities is crucial. WIL research has increasingly focused on student identity and how that identity is developed and impacts experience. Centering student voices is key; we must listen to what students tell us is important to their experiences, to their learning, and to themselves. Thus, we recommend starting by addressing assumptions that are often baked right into our designs, which means not taking a definition of what work is for granted. The idea of "work" is foundational to WIL, and it is perhaps the least examined component. Our research allows us to focus our attention on what students believe about work and helps us understand all of the ways in which work, personal story, and understanding of identities are intertwined with cultural scripts serving as a way to surface beliefs and assumptions.

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