
AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. LEARN-AND-EARN PROGRAMS

Philip D. Gardner, Ph.D.
Director
Collegiate Employment and Research Institute
Michigan State University

Kenneth R. Bartkus, Ph.D.
Director
The Research Group™
Utah State University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learn-and-earn programs can play an important role in preparing students for successful careers. The optimal programs combine career-oriented academic curriculum, relevant work experience, and student financial assistance. The academic curriculum and relevant work experience reflect the “learn” component; student financial assistance, the “earn” component. The earn component is important because it allows students, who might not be able to study without financial assistance, to remain in school.

Learn and earn is important in today’s increasingly competitive and turbulent work environment, particularly for low-income or under-skilled workers who seek better jobs, a better standard of living, and a potential for career success. Additionally, employers want to recruit qualified candidates but are not finding candidates who are adequately prepared. Both these groups could benefit greatly from learn and earn.

Learn-and-earn programs provide the flexibility students need to acquire knowledge and skills and earn a living at the same time. Moreover, the programs teach students the work ethic and communications skills needed to make the transition to the workforce.

Learn-and-earn programs also give employers the edge they need to find qualified job candidates through effective screening, selection, and recruitment techniques. Given the opportunity to influence curriculum design and content, employers reduce recruitment and training costs.

The nation is falling behind in its ability to produce qualified workers. Today’s workers often lack the knowledge and skills to compete successfully in the labor market. Learn-and-earn programs can provide the greatly needed bridge that connects workers with employers.

This report contains a comprehensive analysis of learn and earn. It specifically addresses the issue from the perspective of the student and educational programs that provide learn-and-earn opportunities. Although employers and regular workers are important in the analysis of learn and earn, the literature does not appear to provide much evidence that employer-based, learn-and-earn programs have been objectively vetted. Very few companies are willing to release this kind of proprietary information to competitors. Nonetheless,

this report addresses the gap in the body of knowledge and provides a foundation for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of learn-and-earn programs.

To manage this task, the report is divided into seven sections. The first section includes a working definition of learn and earn and a mission statement. These two elements provide the foundation for evaluating the nature and scope of learn-and-earn models. The second and third sections identify and describe general and context-specific learn-and-earn models. The remaining sections identify and describe the curriculum, certification, delivery, and facilitating models that constitute learn-and-earn programs. The paper concludes with an assessment of the guiding principles of learn and earn, research findings, and recommendations for future research. Because this paper relies heavily on original source material for its program descriptions, hyperlinks in the text and endnotes lead the reader to web sites or file downloads for more detailed investigation.

Learn and earn has the potential to become a vital part of America’s education system. The analysis identified five general learn-and-earn models that work in a variety of settings: internships, cooperative education, apprenticeships, Federal work-study, and practicum. Context-specific models can be tailored to meet the needs of both employers and workers. Two context-specific models applicable in a narrower range of conditions include: clinical rotations or clerkships and legal externships, internships, clerkships, and clinics. All these models form the nucleus of learn and earn.

Four career-oriented delivery models support the nucleus: career and technical education; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs; capstone courses and professional science master’s degree programs (PSM). Each model delivers the rigorous academic work necessary for a career but may not necessarily incorporate relevant work experience or student financial assistance. The curriculum, however, is consistent with the academic component of learn and earn.

Three credential or certification models validate academic training: information technology credentials and certifications; registered dietitian certifications (representative of several healthcare education programs), and general professional credentials such as certificates

given to company employees who successfully complete required training courses. These models are in addition to, or independent from, credentials such as associates and bachelor's degrees.

Five distribution models are instrumental to the implementation of learn and earn: four-year public and private colleges and universities; two-year public and private community colleges; industry and university partnerships; corporate colleges and universities, and distance education. Of these, distance education is becoming a model of choice for many workers due to its flexible setting.

Two facilitating models provide administrative or financial support for learn and earn: governmental and nongovernmental agencies. Governmental agencies include the Bureau of Labor and the Department of Education. Nongovernmental agencies include employers, unions, philanthropic foundations, and sponsorship groups.

The effectiveness of any learn-and-earn program depends on its adherence to four foundational pillars: academic rigor, relevant work experience, student financial support, and stakeholder investment in learn-and-earn programs. The pillars are held in place by a commitment to ensuring accountability, giving students the opportunity for career exploration and professional development, and conferring bona fide credentials.

The descriptions and analysis suggest programs, delivery methods, and funding sources need to change so that America's students are prepared to compete in the labor market and thrive in their chosen fields.

The following statements summarize the findings:

- The general and context-specific models are effective in contributing to successful student outcomes; however, variation exists within and among models.
- No single model was definitively more effective than another; therefore, the value of any particular model is contingent on a variety of factors.
- Learn-and-earn programs will probably be best served through the development of basic principles rather than specific activities.
- For learn and earn to be truly effective as a guiding initiative, the principles need to allow for relatively diverse and flexible governance. Undue bureaucracy will limit the ability of programs to be entrepreneurial and, ultimately, successful.
- Current learn-and-earn programs are reaching the end of their usefulness in today's education and labor market and need to be revitalized.
- New models being developed in companies may be critical to the future of learn and earn. Companies should produce reports documenting the success of their programs so others can benefit.
- Continuing education should be investigated further to more fully understand how it might be effectively integrated into a learn-and-earn model.
- The business community and education institutions that deliver learn and earn need greater collaboration to help ensure agreement on goals and objectives.
- Education institutions need to monitor the labor market regularly, identify emerging trends and changing conditions, and respond to market needs by adjusting their programs accordingly.
- Programs will be more successful if methods are in place to ensure program accountability, attract and retain students, and provide professional development.
- Programs that offer career exploration save time and money: Students learn early on whether they are suited to a particular profession.
- Learn-and-earn programs work better when employers, education institutions, and government and nongovernment agencies work together.
- Community colleges provide one of the strong delivery channels for learn-and-earn programs because of their access and flexibility.
- Career-oriented curriculum models such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) provide strong evidence of academically rigorous and relevant training.
- Industry and university partnerships are not well publicized except in a few cases. Strategic alignment in this area is thus hindered by a dearth of evidence.
- Distance education is another strong delivery channel because it removes the constraints of time and distance present in other delivery channels.
- Government and nongovernment agencies provide meaningful financial support, but their goals may not always coincide with those of stakeholders.
- Government and nongovernment agencies provide guidance in the development and administration of programs, but their diverse agendas present a challenge for strategic alignment between stakeholders.
- More money is needed to attract and retain students. Current funding does not always ensure that students earn a living wage while they study.
- More research is needed to develop best practices for learn and earn. Best practices are critical to the success of both current and future programs.