



**BEREA**  
COLLEGE

**A Model for Working and Learning in  
Liberal Arts Colleges of the Future**





Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

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Pictured left: All Berea students work at least 10 hours per week. Here, students run the sound booth for Berea Convocations.

Cover photo by Chris Radcliffe





Berea College students, faculty, and staff at the Selma March in Selma, Alabama, 1965.



Berea College students, faculty, staff, and alumni at the 50th commemoration of the Selma March in Selma, Alabama, 2015.

## Executive Summary

### Starting Point

From its beginnings as a humble one-room schoolhouse in 1855, Berea College has always been deeply committed to solving the challenges and problems of the society around it. Founded as the first interracial and coeducational institution in the South, even before the Civil War began, Berea has maintained the momentum to continue this audacious work for more than 165 years. In doing so, it became one of the country's most distinctive institutions of higher learning. Through generations of successfully educating students for whom a college degree would have otherwise been unattainable and graduating multifaceted and uniquely career-ready students, **Berea College is a powerful model for what higher education can do to improve the fabric of our society.**

Some highlights of Berea's unique model:

- A model that only serves students of high academic promise who come from low-wealth households. **No student pays tuition—ever.** No other college takes affordability quite so seriously.
- A central tenet is the “dignity and utility of all work.” We understand work itself to be ennobling to the human condition, which is why all students undertake multiple jobs on campus throughout their college careers, complementing their classroom, laboratory, and studio learning. **This work-to-learn-to-earn model is intrinsic throughout Berea's learning community.**
- A deeply ingrained commitment to **immersive inclusion**, educating and graduating one of the most diverse student bodies in the country.
- A **model of radical equity**: Students from humble backgrounds learn, lead, and shape the trajectory of our campus culture and their own futures.
- A community in which students are fully supported, in which they learn the true value and meaning of work, and in which they learn that those whose backgrounds are exceedingly modest financially can be successful in higher education and beyond. **Support is built around an abiding desire to understand—and meet—the needs of Berea students.**
- A **strong financial model**, built on decades of support from alumni and friends who make tuition-free education possible. Berea students graduate with the lowest debt in the nation—and more than half graduate with no educational debt.

*“As we look to the future, and as machines get better at being machines, the primary purpose of higher education must be helping humans get better at being human.”*  
—Randy Bass, Georgetown University

What’s Changed?

We live in a time when liberal education’s relevance is questioned more and more—in the business community, in state legislatures, and among families wanting to ensure their investments in college will have the best possible outcomes. State funding for public colleges and universities has plummeted in the past decade, resulting in huge spikes in tuition; political intrusion into the curriculum is becoming widespread. Though this does not affect private colleges like Berea, all of higher education is now on the defensive and needing to demonstrate outcomes that may or may not have any bearing on the actual quality of education.

Increased public and political demand for STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) programs, robotics, online learning, à la carte degree programs, affordable tuition, minimal debt, and high-paying jobs for graduates has also diverted attention from the value of residential liberal arts programs to the point that they can sometimes be seen as outdated and even quaint. Most of these colleges have also struggled for years, unsuccessfully, to diversify their student bodies, racially and socioeconomically. **A college experience that includes only rich white students is not only incomplete but is also totally insufficient for preparing students for the world in which they will work and live.**

In addition, the **traditional funding model for higher education (high tuition/high financial aid, decreasing net revenue) was out of date and failing miserably before the COVID-19 pandemic**; it was laid bare, and ultimately completely broke down, during the pandemic. Some colleges did not survive. Others are hanging on by a thread and may still fail. A new model is desperately needed if quality education is to survive and be accessible to all students, not just the wealthy ones.

As Georgetown University’s Randy Bass has written, “As we look to the future, and as machines get better at being machines, the primary purpose of higher education must be helping humans get better at being human.”

Enter Berea College

Berea’s stellar success offers other institutions a vision of what’s possible: higher education that is more accessible, affordable, equitable, supportive, and ultimately, effective. The changes in the world of work have placed Berea’s model front and center. No longer should it be just an inspiring and distinctive institution whose mission and principles are not applicable:

- Berea’s foundational, sophisticated, and intersectional understanding of race, class, gender, and labor provides vital guidelines in today’s search for ways to answer some of higher education’s most vexing questions.
- Berea’s Labor Program, rooted in the notion of both the nobility of labor and the erasure of class, race, and gender difference, provides a bridge beyond backgrounds of scarcity for students seeking economic and social mobility and a life of purpose.
- Berea excels at helping students develop what have historically been called “soft skills”; ironically, we know from employers and graduate schools that these skills are now needed more urgently than ever, in business and in life. **Better humans are being grown here.**

Other higher education institutions should be looking to Berea as a thought leader, a vital guide to reconfiguring the college experience for the current and next generation. Berea has been ingenious in addressing the challenges that plague higher education today. The way it has answered and addressed these questions contributes to its distinctiveness and is the reason we believe Berea is truly a college like no other.

*But it need no longer be unique.* What if this model were applicable to more than just Berea? Other institutions might be very well served by trying to emulate some of the Berea model to make higher education more accessible, affordable, equitable, supportive, and effective. A well-educated, well-prepared society benefits everyone—the greater good, well served.

Just as Berea has been a way out of poverty for generations of students, Berea can also serve as a way forward for other small colleges that are struggling to meet the daunting challenges posed by the rapidly changing higher education landscape of 2022 and beyond.

*Better humans are being grown here.*

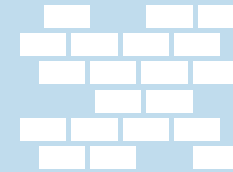




Photo by Charlie C Campbell

## Foreword

by Ashley Finley, Vice President for Research and Senior Advisor to the President, American Association of Colleges and Universities



***I***n so many ways, segregation shaped me, and education liberated me.” In just a handful of words, Maya Angelou captured the essence of what defines a truly *liberal* education. Her words underscore that even amid the most impenetrable structures of confinement and inequality, each of us has the unfettered ability to free our mind. The single greatest tool for achieving that kind of liberation has been and remains education. **What is left for institutions of higher learning to figure out is *how* to achieve transformation.** For example, within what environments of learning are students enabled to seek empowerment, to flourish regardless of circumstance, and to leverage their strengths?

**In myriad ways, Berea College has addressed the question of *how*.** Even more, the efficacy of the Berea model—steeped in agency, equity, and purpose—has applicability well beyond the boundaries of its own unique campus. Countless times I have cited Berea’s work, always with the intention of helping faculty and staff across the country to understand there is much to learn from this “work college.”

As a sociologist, I am often guided by the disciplinary principle of “seeing the general in the particular.” I am inclined to see broad meaning in the specifics of a social phenomenon. **My approach to this foreword borrows from that principle in seeing Berea not as a place where learning happens through a very specific model. Rather, I see Berea as a place where learning is liberated because its model embodies core values for supporting student development and success.** The following paragraphs focus on Berea’s particularity for the sake of revealing the shared nature of those values—for all institutions of higher education.

Let’s start with the Edwards Building, built in 1902. A physical representation of the College’s mission, this building was built by students. To view the building is to see

Pictured left: The brickwork of Edwards Building, constructed by students in 1902. The first few courses of brickwork are rough, lending to their inexperience.



the progression of their learning. Looking closely at the building's foundation and scanning slowly up, one can see that the bricks, though laid well, become straighter in alignment and more even in spacing with each added course, until the imperfections fade away. Each brick signifies how the best modalities of learning are those in which students can apply their skills in ways that are practical, meaningful, and even enduring. At the third story, students applied their masonry learning with all kinds of sophisticated crenellation.

Though not every campus can have buildings that so beautifully reflect John Dewey's observation that "we learn by doing," campuses are likely to have experiences like internships, learning communities, senior capstones, and community-based or service-learning experiences. **These highly effective educational practices have been identified as "high-impact practices" because research has consistently and robustly shown them to be effective for improving student learning outcomes and skill development, retention, and graduation rates.**

Additionally, American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) employer research provides strong support for the ways in which these experiences can help distinguish job candidates in the hiring process. In our most recent study, 83-90 percent of employers sampled reported that they would be "somewhat" or "much more" likely to hire a student who had engaged in any of the high-impact practices listed. Ninety percent reported this preference for internships or work-study experiences, followed closely by students having a portfolio of their work (89 percent) and an "experience that involved working in community settings with people from diverse backgrounds or cultures" (88 percent).<sup>1</sup>

Findings from AAC&U's 2021 employer study **also signaled the ways in which age differences among employers may point to shifting preferences among younger generations of employers.** For example, though all employers indicated they valued students' engagement in high-impact practices, employers under the age of 40 consistently indicated that they would be "much more" likely to hire students with these experiences at rates that were significantly higher than employers who were 50 or older.<sup>2</sup> This contrast was particularly stark for experiences that were community focused, either locally or globally, that involved research with faculty. **The more that institutions can link the applications of student learning with the processes of problem-solving that define real-world contexts and workplace environments, as Berea has done, the greater the benefit for students' learning and career preparation.**

The work of campuses, however, is not only to situate and implement learning but also to support students' engagement in it. **The "doing" of learning is hard work.** The effort often comes with failure, frustration, and confusion. **Arguably, the two most profound commitments a campus can make to supporting student learning are to foster relationship building and to embrace equity.** Two Berean particularities help show the meaning of these commitments.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Finley, *How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most*, American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Internships were the only high-impact practice for which no significant difference was found between younger and older employers in terms of hiring preference. Ibid.

In the Great Commitments, Berea's historic mission statement (page 33), the words "community" or "communities" appear in five of the eight Commitments. The secret of student learning is that students do not succeed on their own. **Colleges and universities need to remember that communities are more than the places "out there," where students engage in a world beyond campus. Communities also happen alongside and within campus boundaries and are spaces in which students are challenged, accepted, and emboldened.** The often-siloed efforts of student affairs and advising are not on their own enough to fully deliver on the recognition that student success depends upon engaging students as individuals with preferences, aspirations, strengths, and values. **Student success must be multimodal and connected. In this sense, the metaphor of a bridge is salient because it invokes the ways that students are consistently bridging experiences, their senses of self, growing knowledge and ideas, and relationships.** Berea's network of bridges—Bridge In, Bridge Through, Bridge Out—together exemplify the kind of "relationship-rich"<sup>3</sup> education that takes seriously the idea that student success requires intersecting communities for students to find connection, mentorship, and belonging.

Perhaps the most frequently cited finding of AAC&U's many employer studies, since first conducted in 2007, are the broad, transferable workplace skills employers value most highly. Most recently, "teamwork" was deemed "very important" for workforce success by the largest percentage of employers (62 percent), followed by "critical thinking" (60 percent) and "the ability to analyze and interpret data" (57 percent).<sup>4</sup> For the first time, our 2021 employer study also explored the degree to which employers value mindsets, aptitudes, and dispositions for workplace success. **Characteristics such as "drive/work ethic," "ability to take initiative," and "self-confidence" were seen just as or more important than skills like teamwork and critical thinking.** The recognition of these skills and dispositions among employers has provided powerful support for campuses in orienting curricula to develop these outcomes and as focal points for the implementation of high-impact practices. What is often overlooked, or underemphasized, is that the true measure of a campus' success in delivering on outcomes goes beyond simply providing access to these skills. **Success means a campus endeavors to provide *all* students with these skills. Achieving the latter requires matching commitments to learning with equal commitments to equity.**

A commitment to equity requires that campuses work for the betterment of all students while also seeing students as individuals. I often cite a story from Berea when I talk about what this means. Years ago, the Berea president started a running club for students, staff, and faculty. After much excitement and promotion, the first morning run arrived. The president quickly realized with the arrival of students that an important detail had been overlooked—not all students had running shoes. **The importance of equity in this story is not that Berea got shoes for the students who needed them (it did); it is that each student got shoes that *fit*.** The notion of fit underscores that equity is more than disaggregating data or even doing what is fair. Equity is about seeing and elevating each student's unique strengths and assets. **Within**

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert, *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Finley, *How College Contributes to Workforce Success*, 6.

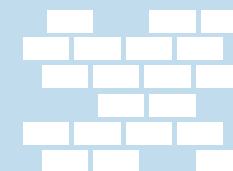




Photo by Charlie C Campbell

Berea's work model, there is the opportunity for students to develop all the skills, mindsets, and dispositions that employers have identified as critical for workplace success. But just as important, there is the opportunity for each student to find their purpose. Finding purpose within work is no small thing. Over the decades that Gallup has studied well-being across multiple dimensions (e.g., community, financial, physical, social, and career), it is the dimension of "career well-being" that has the greatest impact on a person's overall well-being.

The landscape of American higher education is astoundingly diverse. The multidimensionality of programming, mission, and context makes direct comparisons tricky at best. Our opportunity amid the diversity is to be emboldened by institutions of higher education, like Berea, that live their values through models of learning and engagement that robustly support student success. Drawing upon Berea's commitments to applied learning, relationship building, purpose, and equity, our effort should not be to replicate its model but, rather, to simulate its ethic. In the most particular of places, we can find a shared meaning for transforming students' lives.



Pictured left: As construction progressed, the improvement in the students' masonry skills became more evident as shown in the detailed work around the windows of Edwards Building.





*Fee argued that his village in Kentucky was to be a place “where labor shall be respectable and where laborers shall have cultivated minds, so that they can go out and be efficient in all the avocations of life.”*

## Preamble<sup>5</sup>

On November 13, 1859, Rev. John G. Fee delivered a rousing speech to Rev. Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Church, in Brooklyn, New York, in which he described how he had come to his position against slavery in the South. For Fee, to be a true Christian meant that all were created of one blood, and thus, one had to condemn the institution and practice of slavery. His abolitionist position and the promotion of racial integration of the South had already caused his own exile from Madison County, Kentucky, the removal of his church from the Presbyterian and Baptist conventions, and his sufferings at the hands of angry mobs while preaching in Kentucky.

Fee continued: Not only had slavery been an evil horror to the dignity of all people, but it had also brought the very concept of labor into disrepute. He appealed to the audience: “We want to invite the friends of freedom and righteousness in the surrounding counties to unite with us in the efforts to make labor respectable—for slavery, all know, makes labor disreputable.”<sup>6</sup>

Echoing the arguments of his Madison County supporter, Cassius Clay, who had already decried the agrarian slave economy of the South as preventing the industrializing progress in the emancipated North, Fee argued that the learning and practice of trades had become almost exclusively the domain of enslaved labor. The demeaning of manual labor through the institution of slavery meant that “in the city of Lexington, where there are not less than 20,000 inhabitants, there is not a single white young man—as I am informed by a native of that city—who is learning a trade. Why? Because this is the work of slaves. Slaves are placed in the blacksmith’s shop, the carpenter’s shop, as plasterers, masons, etc. They are crowding out all free white laborers and making labor itself odious to them.”<sup>7</sup> To reestablish the “dignity of labor,” as well as realize the equal-

<sup>5</sup> Berea College is grateful for the support from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, which made this work possible. Grateful acknowledgment also goes to those who contributed to this work: Jenny Akins, Sylvia Asante, Brittany Ash, Chad Berry, Katherine M. Faull, Kelly Linville, Ian Norris, Anne Ponder, and Collis Robinson.

<sup>6</sup> “Discourse by Reverend Fee delivered to Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, N.Y., November 13, 1859,” p. 39. Berea College Special Collections and Archives (SCA), RG 1.02, Box 8, Folder 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



ity he thought the Scriptures advocated, Fee argued that his village in Kentucky was to be a place “where labor shall be respectable and where laborers shall have cultivated minds, so that they can go out and be efficient in all the avocations of life.”<sup>8</sup> And those to be educated in this place were to be people of all races. Whites needed to relearn the nobility of labor, as Peter the Great had cast off his title and worked among the men on the docks,<sup>9</sup> and the formerly enslaved needed freedom to choose the labor they wished to perform. The integration of the races in the college he founded in 1855 should not be regarded as problematic. After all, he said, white people had found no issue with the proximity of Black persons when the latter were working as domestic servants and field laborers during slavery. *The problem was not one of race but rather of class or, as Fee put it, caste.*

The address in the Brooklyn church became widely known across the U.S. after it was published in the *New York Tribune*. Anti-abolitionists were shocked by Fee’s call for “a thousand John Browns.” The *Louisville Courier* whipped up sentiment against Fee, accusing him of calling for an insurrection like the contemporary raid at Harper’s Ferry just a month before. While it was one thing to be an abolitionist in the North, it was quite another and dangerous to be one in the South.

§§§

**F**ee knew Beecher from his time at Lane Theological Seminary near Cincinnati, where Fee crafted the vision for his life’s work of a radically inclusive school in a slaveholding state. His father was none too pleased when his son shared that vision, for the elder Fee owned more than a dozen enslaved people in Bracken County, Kentucky, between Lexington and Cincinnati.

Having served as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, in which John Fee later came into conflict for refusing to welcome congregants who kept people in bondage, Fee became an abolitionist itinerant minister but had trouble finding sympathetic churches in proslavery Kentucky. Eventually, he honed his fervent beliefs in abolition and began work with the American Missionary Association (AMA), which rallied for abolition of slavery, education of African Americans, and racial equality. During the Civil War, Fee led AMA efforts to educate free people of color at nearby Camp Nelson, in Kentucky.

Near the end of the Civil War, when it was safe to do so, John and Matilda Fee and their family and other early Bereans returned to reopen the school and college that John Fee founded expressly to educate Black and white, women and men, all living and learning together. Fee named the town in which he founded his institution for the biblical town whose residents, according to the apostle Paul, were much more open minded than those in Thessalonica. Berea College, modeled on Oberlin College, became the South’s first interracial and coeducational institution of higher learning.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> John Fee, “Origins and Principles of Berea Literary Institution,” SCA, RG 1.01, Box 1, Folder 3.

# 1855

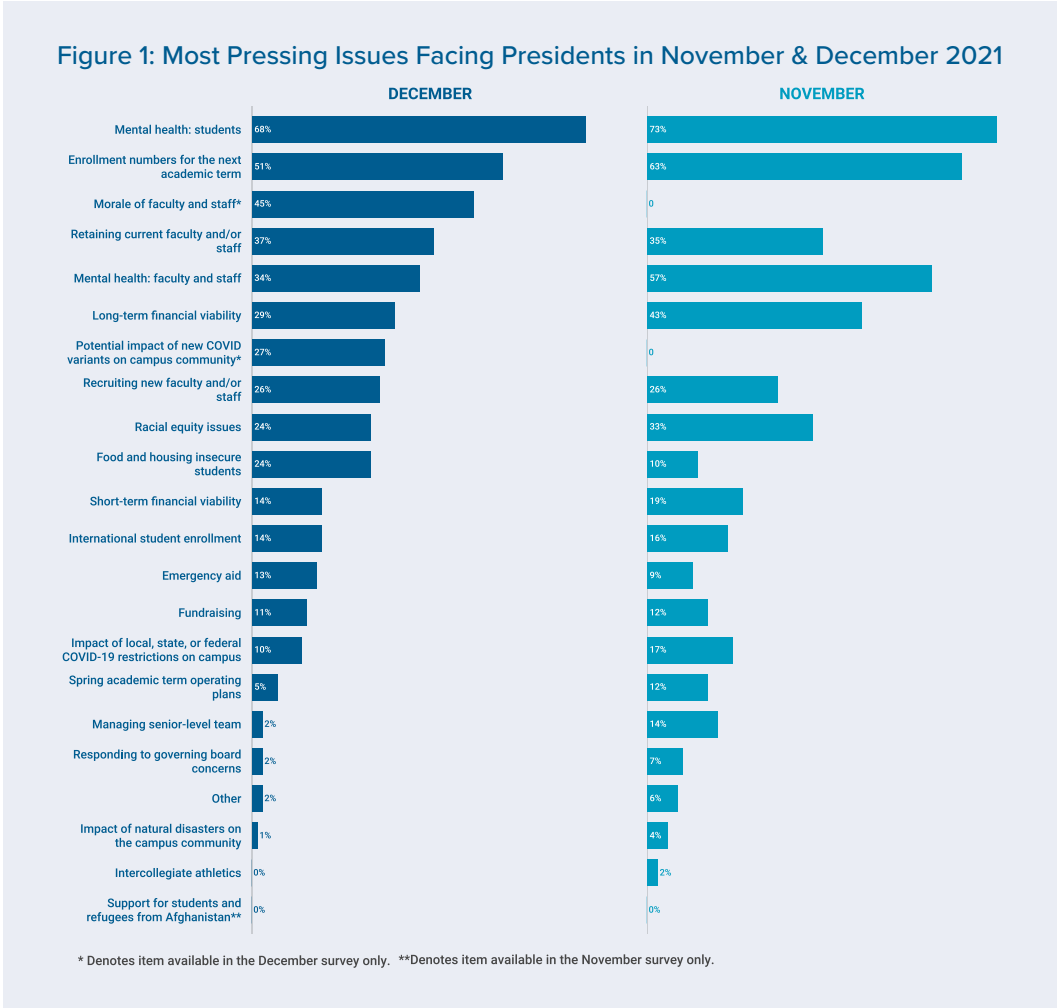
*From its humble beginnings as a one-room schoolhouse, Berea College was always deeply connected to the challenges and problems of the society around it. The way it addressed and answered these in the antebellum and postbellum nineteenth century gave it momentum to continue this audacious work.*

*In so doing, it became one of the country’s most distinctive institutions of higher learning. That distinctiveness, however, has sometimes compelled other institutions to dismiss it as an outlier, its inspiring mission notwithstanding, perceived as offering little that was practically plausible in or applicable to higher education. This white paper seeks to challenge this perception in the strongest of ways, suggesting that Berea offers higher education a powerful model and antidote for the many vexing challenges facing higher education today, just as it did with its daring founding in 1855 in a slaveholding state.*



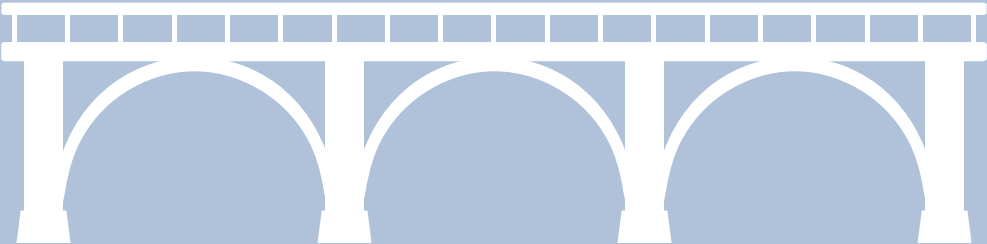
# The Many Challenges to Higher Education Today

Figure 1, according to a survey of U.S. college and university presidents conducted in December 2021, identifies the most pressing issues facing higher education in the U.S.:<sup>10</sup>



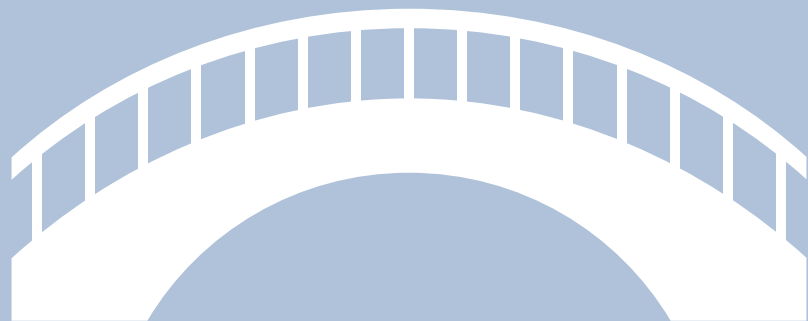
Issues of mental health, well-being, morale, retention, and recruitment—whether among faculty, staff, or students—rank high, along with concerns about the future financial viability of a higher education institution. Berea has long had a razor-sharp focus on the students whom it serves, because despite the racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of its students, one significant thing is homogeneous: the socioeconomic background shared by all its students. Such a fact allows Berea to serve students to an unparalleled degree in higher education, through what it calls the Bridge-in, Bridge-through, and Bridge-out work. Here are three examples:

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Turk, Maria Claudia Soler, Hollie Chessman, and Ángel Gonzalez, “College and University Presidents Respond to COVID-19: 2020 Fall Term Survey, Part II,” American Council on Education, December 10, 2020, available at <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2020-Fall-Term-Part-Two.aspx>.

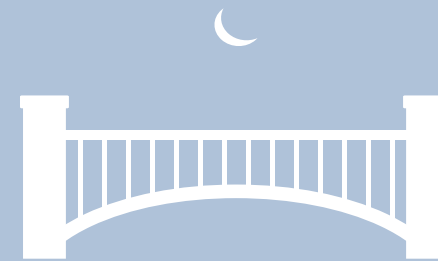


**Bridge in:** The bridge-in work seeks to achieve in matriculating students a seamless transition from high school to college. A summer bridge program, therefore, for 60 randomly selected students helps bridge the divide. Students come to campus for four weeks in the summer after high school graduation and take two mini courses that immerse them in deeply engaged learning. They also participate in the College’s Labor Program and get paid for this time on campus because bringing them to campus disrupts earning for some in summer jobs at home. The first-to-second-year retention rate over the years of this program has averaged 93 percent, a remarkable achievement for a cohort of nearly 100 percent Pell Grant recipients, many of whom have a chance at being the first in their families to graduate with a four-year degree. **And there’s more: These 60 Bridge students take their experience and apply it to the benefit of entering students who come in August, conveying to new arrivals that as students who’ve spent just four weeks on campus, they already feel a deep sense of belonging, explaining to their new peers that they can expect to feel that same sense soon.**





**Bridge through:** For many decades, the College has provided free dental and orthodontic care to some of its students most in need. But such care was only a fraction of what was needed. Five years ago, with seed funding from philanthropy, Berea opened a free dental clinic on campus for its students since many of them had never had access to dental care. Again, such care is really part of a holistic awareness of the students the College serves. If an institution develops the mind but disregards the body and the spirit, then that student has not been well served for a life well lived. The College also supports a robust Office of Student Success and Transition, whose work is meant to complement the caring advising and mentoring of faculty by ensuring that familiar faces are present when a faculty member may be unavailable. **These and other examples of bridge-through efforts all are intended to convey to students that Berea really was built for them, thereby supporting in virtually every student a deep and abiding sense of belonging and inclusion.**



**Bridge out:** In 2011, the College earmarked a half-time faculty position devoted to internships and a half-time staff position to career development. Alumni were quite vocal that the College had prepared them well in terms of an education, but it was woefully lacking, they told the new president upon his arrival the following year, in preparing them for life beyond Berea. In a time when many of the nation's most esteemed liberal arts institutions, which serve only a tiny fraction of the first-generation and Pell Grant recipients that Berea does, had nearly a dozen staff members in internships and career development, the administration realized it needed to do much more. Today, there are six full-time employees in the Office of Internships and Career Development, and there are plans to support two more positions for a total of eight. **Mostly made possible by philanthropic generosity, Berea is today able to offer a host of services to help Berea students design and construct their metaphorical bridges out to the world beyond campus.** There are credit-bearing courses for students taught by credentialed staff to help them in vocational discernment. There are funds for nearly 275 students annually to make internship dreams possible without worrying about how to pay for that dream—including housing, meals, transportation, clothing, and even funds to help them return to campus for the fall term with some savings. Funding exists for professional test preparation, such as the NCLEX, MCAT, GMAT, and LSAT, as well as for visits to graduate and professional schools that students are interested in. Every student can receive money for a professional wardrobe, and students are taken to a department store where they are met and mentored in their selections by department store staff. And finally, realizing that students do not come from families who can contribute \$500 or more to allow a graduate to travel to a new graduate or professional school or make a security deposit on an apartment, each graduate receives \$500 to begin their journey on the bridge out from Berea.



## *Access without support is inhumane.*

The principle behind these and many other supports for the students Berea serves is quite simple: *Access without support is inhumane.* In addition to providing a high-quality education, Berea must strive to make up in just four years the kinds of investments in young people that wealthier families can make in 18 years prior to matriculation. Consider the list of vexing challenges identified today by higher education leadership, and realize how many of these could be addressed more effectively if such a principle were applied.

And there are even more specific examples of challenges today. First among many is cost. More than half of secondary students today are eligible for free and reduced lunch. So how can these students gain access to quality postsecondary education with little household income and the declining impact of Pell Grants? Much has been made of “free-tuition” schemes in states ranging from Tennessee to New York. What these programs often do, however, to make them economically feasible is to use students’ state and federal grants as first-use funds to apply to tuition costs, which leaves little or no funding for students to obtain housing and meals. *Again, access without support is inhumane.* What good is free tuition when a student doesn’t have adequate housing and food? Berea has addressed this challenge for many years by using other funding to take tuition costs off the table for the student. *Berea, it should be noted, is one of the few—perhaps the sole—institution that has both academic and financial eligibility for admission, meaning it admits only students of high academic promise and low financial means, essentially making Pell eligibility a requirement for admission.* One must ask, How many other institutions also have a different kind of financial eligibility requirement: to admit students of high financial means? It’s why we often say that Berea strives to provide the best education that money *can’t* buy. Such work allows a student’s Pell Grant to be used for housing and meals, the costs of which are kept as low as possible. And because Berea is a federally recognized Work College—more on that below—every student is required to work at least 10 hours per week, and every Berea student earns at least \$2,500 annually for such work. Any remaining bill required for housing and meals after Pell monies are applied can often be paid for using a portion of these work earnings, meaning Berea students graduate with the lowest debt in the nation—and more than half graduate with no educational debt.



**This much is true: Good ideas attract philanthropy’s attention. Almost all the cost of attending Berea College is underwritten by the College and its supporters, who believe in this fervently. Many graduate without any debt at all, with the boost into a meaningful and productive life that a splendid education provides. When special learning opportunities arise, such as subsidized study abroad, small amounts of debt may be considered. No other college takes affordability so seriously, within the four years and beyond.**



As discourse and concern about the student debt crisis intensified, in April 2022, a letter sent to Congress made the argument for doubling the Pell Grant. Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, and Barbara Mistick, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, wrote, “Doubling Pell would restore much of the purchasing power the grant had in FY 1975, when the maximum Pell award covered 78 percent of the cost of attendance at a four-year public college. It now covers just 28 percent.” Arguing that doubling the Pell Grant “with additional grant aid matched by institutions in the form of Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), along with the student’s involvement through Federal Work Study (FWS) employment, could reset the path to recovery post-pandemic for the future of American students.”<sup>11</sup> Such a plan has great utility for the high cost of higher education today.

Mitchell and Mistick clearly identified a financial path forward with federal help for students from backgrounds of limited means who wish to attend college. The combination of Pell, FWS, and SEOG funds would open opportunities for many who have not been able to afford to go to college and relieve them of some of the crippling debt burden that afflicts today’s graduates.<sup>12</sup>

In a study issued at the beginning of the pandemic titled *Making the Case*,<sup>13</sup> the Aspen Institute reported disproportionate higher education indebtedness for people of color, women, and low-income borrowers. For example:

- 21 percent of African American borrowers are behind on their payments, compared to 16 percent of Latinos and 6 percent of white borrowers
- the typical African American borrower owes 95 percent of one’s student debt 20 years after enrollment, compared to 6 percent for white borrowers
- two-thirds of all outstanding student debt is held by women
- first-generation students are twice as likely to be behind on payments compared to students who are not (12 percent and 6 percent, respectively)
- 84 percent of low-income students using Pell Grants graduate with student debt, compared with 46 percent who do not qualify for such aid.

All the most heavily debt-burdened demographic groups listed in this study are those whom Berea College serves. Fee’s early principles, steadfastly and courageously held throughout his life, set Berea on a course that would differentiate it in 1855 and continue to make it unique today. *But it need no longer be unique.* Other higher education institutions can look to Berea as a thought leader, not just as an inspiring and distinctive institution whose mission and principles are not applicable.

Set on this course by Fee and early Bereans, the Berea of today continues to answer some of higher education’s most persistent and vexing challenges. For example:

<sup>11</sup> “Student Aid Alliance Urges Congress to Continue Supporting Student Aid Programs, Double Pell Grants,” April 25, 2022, <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Alliance-Urges-Congress-to-Support-Student-Aid.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.valueoffree.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Kiese Hansen and Tim Shaw, “Making the Case: Solving the Student Debt Crisis,” Aspen Institute Financial Security Program, Feb. 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/solving-the-student-debt-crisis/>.

- **Diversity.** Guided by its motto that “God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth,” Berea admits students from more than 40 states and 70 countries, although by board mandate, at least 70 percent of its students must come from Kentucky and Appalachia—both of which are perennially underserved areas where higher educational attainment lags the nation.
- **Access.** Admission requires academic *and* financial eligibility. A high school student with a 4.0 GPA and a perfect SAT whose parents are a banker and a surgeon would *not* be eligible for admission because that student has many high-quality options for postsecondary education. Berea serves those students in whom an investment from the institution is worth the possible return, simply because they do not have many other options for high-quality education.
- **Support.** Berea is moved by the book *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*,<sup>14</sup> which asserts that scarcity captures the mind. The authors suggest that freeing up the mental bandwidth of low-wealth people by mitigating the mental energy spent on financial concerns allows that bandwidth to be applied to boundless success instead of mere survival. Mitigating the concern at Berea includes taking tuition off the table, making housing and meals affordable, and adding unparalleled support to assist students in graduating on time. These actions are all part of the Berea magic and challenge the preconception that what is affordable or free cannot also be of very high quality. Berea strives to do all it can in this area, but at certain disappointing times, it cannot completely mitigate all the bandwidth spent on things financial for its students, particularly, for example, when a parent is stricken with cancer and has no insurance and no caregiver. That student will likely be called home to provide that care. The institution’s task is then to ensure that that student one day will return to complete a Berea education.
- **Academic success.** Berea’s students graduate at a rate up to 17 percentage points higher than what would be predicted for their socioeconomic cohort (nearly 100 percent Pell Grant recipients, even for those who don’t qualify because of citizenship). Recently, 88 percent of first-year students returned for their second year—a remarkable retention rate.

<sup>14</sup> Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (New York: Times Books, 2013).



- **Radical sense of equity.** Commitments to equity increasingly common today were baked into Berea's DNA in 1855, when founders struggled to form a school *and a society* where equity among women and men and Black and white students was the rule, not the exception. That same commitment can be witnessed across campus today in ways that Berea's founders may have never imagined.
- **Belonging.** And associated with that sense of equity comes a sense of belonging because here is an institution that from the beginning was built for the underserved. Amid great racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity is a palpable socioeconomic homogeneity. No Pell Grant student here arrives by Greyhound bus only to learn that her roommate was flown in on the family's private jet.
- **Financial model.** In place of tuition payments, Berea's endowment operates as a tuition-replacement fund and supports three-quarters of Berea's operating budget. The remainder comes from federal and state grants and contributions from generous donors who make a no-tuition promise possible to every Berea student.
- **Mentoring.** At Berea, there's not just one mentor per student: there are many. Faculty *and staff* are essential in supporting and helping students to learn, whether that mentor is a faculty member with a Ph.D. or a staff member with a GED. Because so many staff members are labor supervisors at Berea, they are considered General Faculty. Staff members play an important role with students, particularly in labor positions grounded in learning ever-important soft skills. Faculty are referred to as College Faculty for their critical mentoring role in teaching and learning. Regardless, all are charged with supporting learning, and all take pride as students walk across the stage at Commencement.

*“My labor supervisors were real mentors for me, and I actually still have a relationship with them both more than a decade later. They really helped foster my curiosity and allowed me to do projects and take ownership of those projects that interested me. And that influenced my grad school choice and what I studied and my current job choice. One wrote my letter of recommendation for grad school, and the other wrote me a reference for the position that I have now. They were very instrumental in developing what I wanted to do in life.” –Brittney Morris '10*

*“I got a real sense of closeness with my labor supervisors and definitely felt adopted by some of them. And it was interesting for me: It was a really wide variety of personalities that I worked for while I was at Berea, and that opportunity to work with such a diverse array was very useful. Just growing up in a working-class, low-income family, I think I felt trapped in terms of what my career and occupational options were before Berea.” –Jason Fults '06*

*“My labor program was so deeply encompassed by community service. Working with groups off campus the entire time that I was there deepened my understanding of how we give back to communities. The supervisors that I had shaped the way that I think about what I want my career to look like, and the way that I think about my calling in life. I couldn't have done that without the supervisors.” –Ethan Hamblin '14*



Berea has been ingenious in addressing the challenges that plague higher education today. The way it has answered and addressed these questions contributes to its distinctiveness and is the reason we say Berea is truly a college like no other. Other institutions might consider emulating some elements of the Berea model to make higher education more accessible, affordable, equitable, supportive, and effective. The purpose of this document serves to illuminate how higher education can serve *every* student.

Finally, there is one more important element of the Berea experience that makes it quite different from most other institutions:

**Workplace experience.** As a federally recognized Work College, Berea hires every student to work 10-12 hours each week at a campus assignment, indicative of the College's belief in the dignity of all labor, mental and manual. Students can choose a work assignment that matches their academic interests, giving them a significant advantage after graduation. Students are paid for their work, allowing them to pay for personal expenses and even housing and meals on campus. Some students even share a portion of these earnings with family back home to help with household expenses.

*“When you go to Berea, you are now juggling classes, and all the work that comes with those classes, and also actually having a labor job. I’m in Raleigh, North Carolina, and a lot of people go to N.C. State or Duke or UNC. And hearing my experience, they are really impressed. They’ve gone to these larger colleges, but they said, ‘Wow, you have worked; you got your degree. And you also did all the classwork and your extracurriculars, all those things.’ A lot of it is that Berea go-get-it-ness to just figure it out. And so, I really appreciate Berea for forcing us to do the jobs that we were not prepared for. You figure it out. And the people who are there who have helped to guide us along the way made it enjoyable. I think that having that experience has been really meaningful in furthering my career.” –Susan English ’02*

## The Promise of Work

What does John Fee’s understanding of the intertwining of race and labor in the mid-nineteenth century have to do with the way in which Berea College has implemented work as an integral part of its educational mission? Furthermore, how does linking work and class/caste/racial difference become the reason that in 1906 *“Labor”* became a requirement of all students and not just an option open to those who needed it to survive financially in college?

The foundational, sophisticated, and intersectional understanding of race, class, gender, and labor embraced by Fee and early Bereans provides vital guidelines in today’s search for ways to combat some of higher education’s most vexing questions. Additionally, Fee’s desire to redefine the very meaning of labor is important to understand. Fee was not adhering to a nineteenth-century Christian notion of the dignity of labor as residing in the “work against sin” or seeing it as a redemptive force. Rather, Fee argued that labor itself was ennobling to the human state (Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx were taking similar positions at the same time); however, labor, to Fee and other abolitionists and like-minded politicians, had been so degraded by the institution of slavery because it dehumanized the enslaved by alienating them from the products of their labor and reduced the enslaver to the status of unskilled dependent upon that skilled labor from enslaved peoples. It also further degraded white working-class people who believed they were above manual labor. It was no accident, then, that free soil, free labor, and free men (and later women) became the mantra of the Radical Republicans after the Civil War.

Fee also keenly recognized the liberatory promise of labor for those who had been freed from enslavement and gender-based dependency on others, along with the liberatory promise of a liberal education (the Latin roots of liberal come from *liberalis*, suggesting freedom, dignity, and honor—in short, also liberatory), especially for those groups that had been traditionally excluded from such opportunity.



And then came the Day Law. Its passage in 1904 in Kentucky<sup>15</sup> prohibiting interracial education—a law meant to punish Berea College exclusively, since it was the only interracial institution in the Commonwealth—and the subsequent segregation of the educational process brought an influx of white students from wealthier families to Berea College. Historian Elisabeth Peck observed that after this enforced racial segregation, “the presence of the monied class was poisoning college life.”<sup>16</sup> The class divide among the students meant that some women could afford silk dresses and flowers from Cincinnati, while others had to work to get through their education. This pernicious economic and class divide came to an abrupt halt when President William G. Frost ruled that *all* students were expected to work, and thus quickly, “the finery disappeared.”<sup>17</sup>

Once again, this historical account points to another fundamental insight on the part of the College’s leaders. **Socioeconomic class, like race and gender, could not become a source of division in the mission of Berea College to provide a high-quality liberal arts education to “all peoples of the earth.” And one of the ways that mission could become a reality, and remains so today, is through the Labor Program.**

**Labor and Learning**

The issue of integrating labor and learning is one that has occupied Berea College’s educational program for more than a century. Whether in recent times recommending a greater “labor pedagogy” that requires more communication between supervisor and professor, or looking to rename the program as a “work-learning-service program,”<sup>18</sup> or, earlier in the post–World War II period seeking to educate teachers, supervisors, and foremen and emphasizing the importance of student labor to raising the standard of living of those in the whole Berea territory, **creating clear connections between labor and education has been complex and challenging.** How does the College ensure that students see the value and importance of every labor assignment, even those that are mostly manual? How does it stress to professors that student labor is as important to the student’s degree progress as the student’s progress in a course? How does the institution make the nature of student labor equitable so that the student getting up at 5:30 a.m. for an early shift before classes does not resent the student who is working as a Teaching Assistant in one’s major?

*“I had the best experiences in Berea’s Labor Program when I felt like I was very valuable—that the work I was doing was meaningful. And to feel like a collaborator with your professor is very, very meaningful—to say this isn’t just a position you have because you have to have a job. It’s like you are actually important to running the College.” –Karen Reynolds ’14*

<sup>15</sup> Berea fought the Day Law all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost in 1908. See <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep211/usrep211045/usrep211045.pdf>.  
<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Peck, “Needs Make Founders: A Chapter in Berea History,” in *Founders Day Address* (Berea: Berea College Press, 1958), SCA.  
<sup>17</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>18</sup> Great Commitments Revisions Committee (2014-2017), RG 5.24, Box 7/2, SCA.

*“I often tell people that my labor assignment probably had more impact on my career than my education. It’s probably not 100 percent true, but my labor assignment more aligns with the profession I went into and what I do today. I was fortunate.” –Jason Miller ’98*

One of the places to look for guidance on such higher education challenges is the Great Commitments.<sup>19</sup> These are a highly visible statement of the historic mission of the College and its continuing relevance today, providing an ambitious and compendious moral guide for all aspects of Berea. They ideally form the foundation of all decisions made about admissions and financial aid; curriculum; equity and inclusion; sustainability; learning, labor, and service; the Common Good; and the centrality of an inclusive Christian identity—perhaps Berea’s foundational historic Commitment, encapsulated in the idea of “impartial love” for all human beings based on the credo that “God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

As articulated in the Fourth Great Commitment, the Labor Program strives to create a means by which students come to understand the “dignity and utility of all work, mental and manual, and taking pride in work well done.”<sup>20</sup> Drawing on this language, the Labor Learning Goals and linked expected outcomes help to provide a framework through which a progression through the Labor Program can be understood.<sup>21</sup> **They also can provide guidance on how to more intentionally link labor and learning.**

*“The dignity of all labor is what I always come back to when I think about my labor experience. In all the jobs that I’ve worked in since, I’ve been asked to do some strange things on some days. Being willing and able to fully participate and support the organization or whatever job that I was in, recognizing that every single piece of labor in all those organizations has dignity, being able to take pride in the work that I’ve done, and being able to do it to the best of my ability—I think that is a good foundation to build on. And I think it makes me a better team member. It makes me a better employee. It makes me more successful. It makes me happier in my positions.” –Rebecca Tucker ’09*

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.berea.edu/the-great-commitments>.  
<sup>20</sup> <https://www.berea.edu/the-great-commitments/#labor>.  
<sup>21</sup> <https://www.berea.edu/labor-program-office/goals/>.





Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

## *The Great Commitments of Berea College*

Berea College, founded by ardent abolitionists and radical reformers, continues today as an educational institution still firmly rooted in its historic purpose “to promote the cause of Christ.” Adherence to the College’s scriptural foundation, “God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth (Acts 17:26),” shapes the College’s culture and programs so that students and staff alike can work toward both personal goals and a vision of a world shaped by Christian values, such as the power of love over hate, human dignity and equality, and peace with justice. This environment frees persons to be active learners, workers, and servers as members of the academic community and as citizens of the world. The Berea experience nurtures intellectual, physical, aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual potentials and with those the power to make meaningful commitments and translate them into action.

*To achieve this purpose, Berea College commits itself*

- To provide an educational opportunity for students of all races, primarily from Appalachia, who have great promise and limited economic resources.
- To offer a high-quality liberal arts education that engages students as they pursue their personal, academic, and professional goals.
- To stimulate understanding of the Christian faith and its many expressions and to emphasize the Christian ethic and the motive of service to others.
- To promote learning and serving in community through the student Labor Program, honoring the dignity and utility of all work, mental and manual, and taking pride in work well done.
- To assert the kinship of all people and to provide interracial education with a particular emphasis on understanding and equality among Blacks and whites as a foundation for building community among all peoples of the earth.
- To create a democratic community dedicated to education and gender equality.
- To maintain a residential campus and to encourage in all community members a way of life characterized by mindful and sustainable living, health and wellness, zest for learning, high personal standards, and a concern for the welfare of others.
- To engage Appalachian communities, families, and students in partnership for mutual learning, growth, and service.

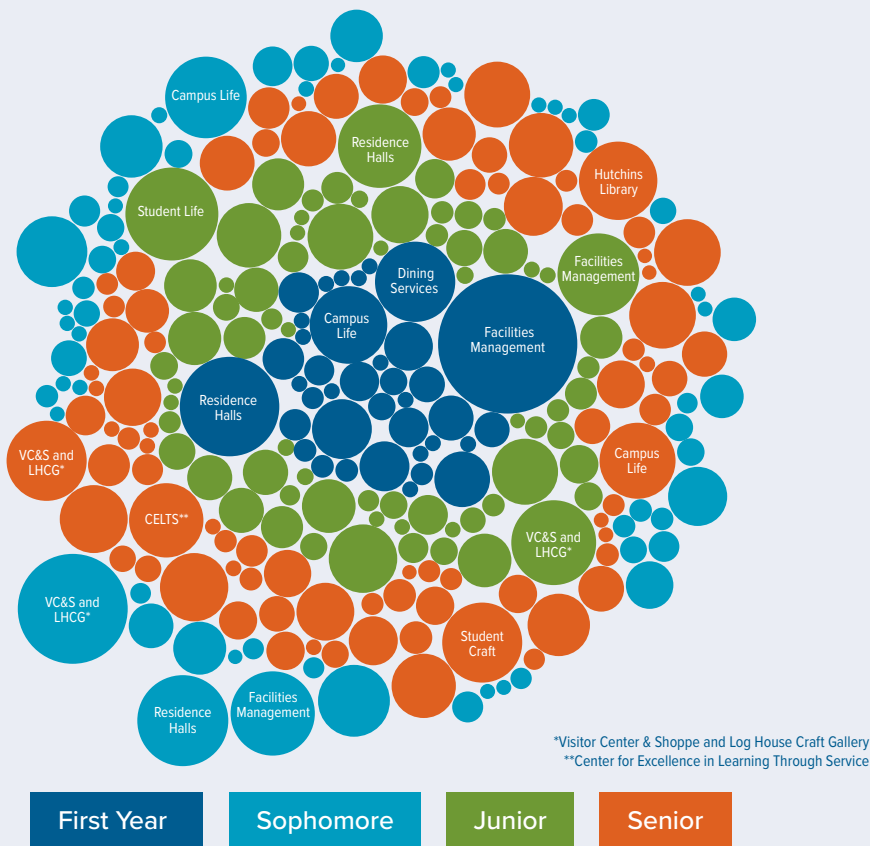
First articulated in 1962, the Great Commitments represent the historic aims and purposes of Berea College since its founding in 1855. The Great Commitments were originally adopted by the General Faculty and the Board of Trustees in 1969; they were revised and similarly approved in 1993 and most recently in 2017.



*“I do meaningful work. It’s like I’m allergic to doing things that I don’t care about. I found it very hard in life, post-Berea, to stay in a workplace environment or an occupation that I don’t deeply care about. So that is a big piece that I came away from Berea with. I think I had a very limited view of what my options were...and felt like I was trapped in being a dishwasher or working in retail or whatever before I came to Berea and realized just what a world of opportunities there are in terms of vocation.” –Jason Fults ’06*

The way in which students work in the Labor Program at Berea College can also help to highlight areas that need further focus. For example, looking at the distribution of Labor positions through departments and class years, definite patterns that correspond to the goals as articulated in the Fourth Great Commitment become visible (see Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> In fall 2021, the most recent period for which there is data, one can see how positions are distributed by class year: First-year students work almost overwhelmingly in the department of facilities, in dining services, and in residence halls.

Figure 2: Departments of Student Employment at Berea College (Fall 2021)



<sup>22</sup> Katherine M. Faull, professor of German and humanities at Bucknell University, who was an ACE Fellow at Berea College in the spring 2022 term, compiled this data from the Berea College Labor Program Office, May 2022.

Most first-year positions are considered entry level and are designated in the WLS (Work-Learning-Service) 1 category, in which the learning goals are “to develop and apply the six soft skills (attendance, accountability, teamwork, initiative, respect, learning) directly related to the work-learning-service level, the description of duties, and the learning opportunities sections of the job description. **Expected Outcome:** In their labor positions, students will exhibit the good habits of attendance, accountability, teamwork, initiative, respect, and life-long learning.”

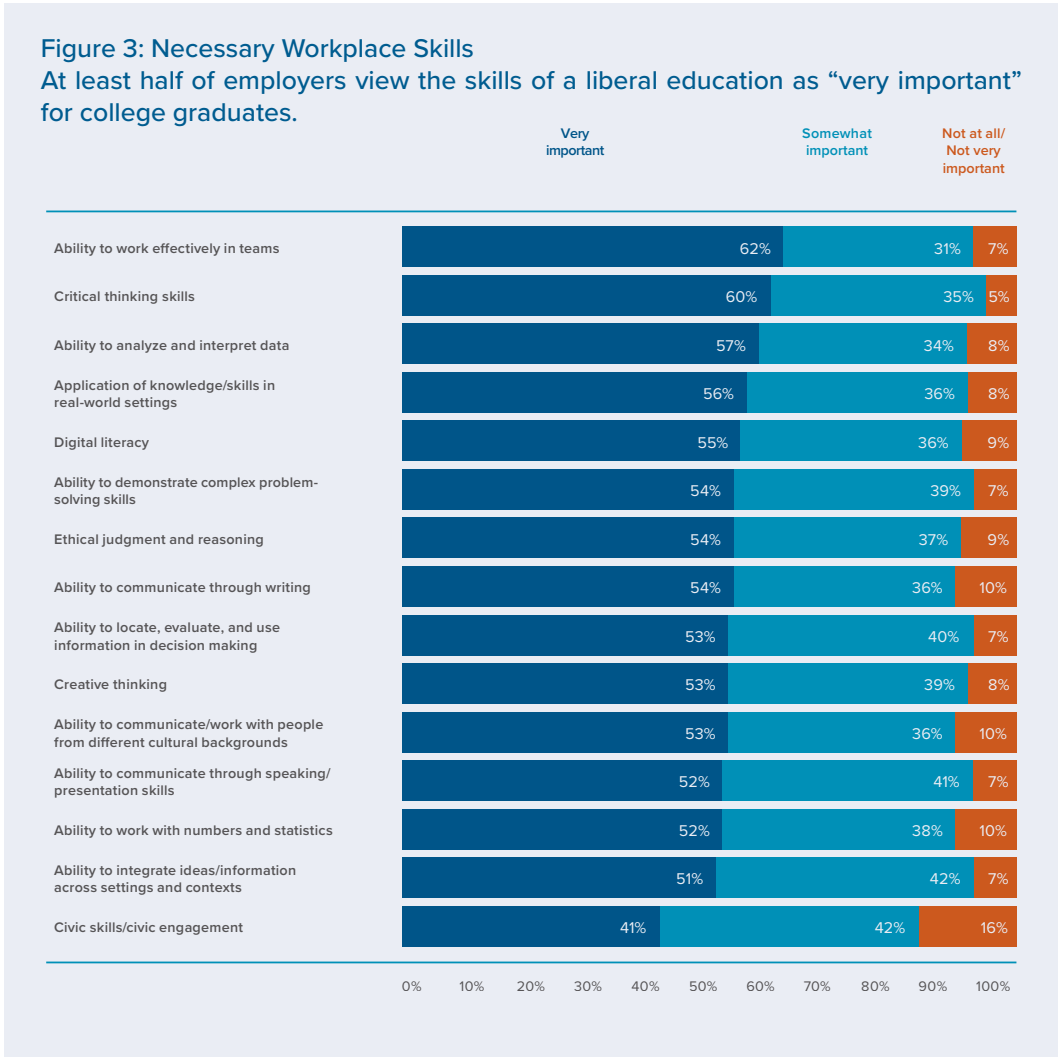
*“[Labor involved] a lot of the soft skills or being responsible for showing up. I think those are meaningful and really set us up to be professionals and to do what we say we’re going to do. All those soft skills really come out, especially when you get that first job out of Berea. Maybe you’re struggling, [but] you’ve got something to fall back on to say, ‘I can do this. I know what I need to do. I know how I need to act. I know what I need to ask and the person I need to be because I’ve been doing this and that.’ And it is different from a work-study student who is just showing up and is just going through the motions because they’re required to do it as part of a financial aid package.” –Geoff Bartlett ’93*

*“I started in food service and then worked as an RA and then also did some other things in special collections, which got me into the library field. But all of those pieces together made me value work in general and see how even if you are just working the stir-fry line every day, there is value in that. And there’s importance in that. To show up every day and do the best you can. That’s why I think it was pretty transformative. I think one piece that every future alumnus should experience, and it seemed to happen your first year, is in one of those jobs that are looked upon as a little beneath people: the groundskeeping, the janitorial, the food service, something that is hard to find dignity in at first. Then you realize you can have those moments where you learn that all work has value. You treat your waitress better if you’ve been a waitress. So I think there’s something to be said if you have one of those jobs that seems beneath people and that you develop a different attitude toward it.” –Missy Rivera ’05*



In their second year at Berea College, students may choose to change their labor position to one that more closely aligns with their academic or professional interests. Then, nearer to graduation, students may occupy positions in the highest WLS 5 category, the Management Level: “WLS 5 [provides] senior-level autonomy, management responsibility, and high technical or skill[s] training. Learning Goals: supervising and managing; understanding department management; making independent judgments on application of policy; taking responsibility for the effectiveness of others; having awareness of departmental and institutional relationships; learning teaching and instruction techniques; improving communication and interpersonal skills; and evaluating workers and procedures.”

These WLS learning goals are highly desirable skills in college graduates that are sought after in the wider job market. According to AAC&U’s survey of 496 employers in late 2020, the ability to work in teams, to think critically, to analyze data, to apply knowledge to real-world settings, and to be proficient in digital literacy are the most sought-after skills among recent graduates (see Figure 3).<sup>23</sup>



<sup>23</sup> Finley, *How College Contributes to Workforce Success*, 6.

*“My position [on the information technology help desk] really taught me a lot about service. I interacted with not only many different personalities in the student body, but in the administration and faculty. In the mid-’90s, computers were still relatively new to a lot of people—there was a varying degree of experience levels. And I could also interact with a lot of people in frustrating situations. And so, in my four years of doing that support, I learned how to deal with a lot of different situations and personalities. That serves me well today in my consulting background, because I continue to service a wide range of individuals in a lot of different industries, with a lot of different backgrounds.” –Jason Miller ’98*

*“One of the huge impacts of the Labor department when I knew it was something really special was when I was applying to grad schools directly from Berea. And I had an interview, and they told me it was a phone interview. But it was basically just a formality because they knew Berea, they knew Berea’s work ethic, and they knew that they could count on me to get the job done, even though I was never a TA [Teaching Assistant] at all. That speaks volumes to me, because they hadn’t even really met me, but they decided ‘we’re going with you.’” –Missy Rivera ’05*

*“That’s the nature of the liberal arts education. We’re not going to Berea to learn a profession, necessarily. The liberal arts experience is to learn how to learn right. We might major in history, or English, or whatever. But work is all those skills that go into it. The labor experience is an opportunity to try things; it’s an opportunity to learn some new skills, to learn to apply things. It’s the perfect complement for a liberal arts education. You get to develop some marketable skills, but they might not necessarily relate directly to a profession because there’s not a lot of jobs for historians out there. We have to figure out how to make that work.” –Geoff Bartlett ’93*

Berea College’s Labor Program is perfectly positioned to teach those skills (especially the application of knowledge to real-world settings), strengthening the value of a liberal arts education in a culture that doubts its relevance.

Admittedly, many high-achieving students from limited means can receive full scholarships to attend prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. Berea is certainly not the only place to offer such educational opportunities. However, and perhaps most importantly, *all of Berea’s graduates belong to a socioeconomic group least likely to graduate from college.*<sup>24</sup> As suggested earlier, Berea students do not bear the social stigma of being a “full-scholarship student” that their peers educated at more expensive elite schools might experience. At Berea, everyone is such a student, and *it’s a mark of distinction, not something to hide.* As previously noted, when in the early twentieth century, the pernicious economic divide was identified, President Frost established the rule that *all* students must work, which discouraged those from wealthier families from attending. This is one of the strongest ways in which Berea supports socioeconomic homogeneity and helps students avoid the shame of coming from backgrounds of limited means. *There are, then, in short, two key ingredients in Berea’s “secret sauce”:* real equity and diversity that fosters belonging and socioeconomic homogeneity that prevents self-loathing.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Basken, “Raj Chetty on Inequalities in the U.S.,” Oct. 14, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/10/14/raj-chetty-discusses-inequalities-us>; and Tom Mortenson, “Estimated Baccalaureate Degree Attainment by Age 24 by Family Income Quartiles: 1970 to 2016,” *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 295 (2018-2019), 1-24.

*“When I did Teach for America, we were surrounded by a lot of Ivy League kids—Harvard, Princeton—and they didn’t have the same skills that we have. And that was awesome to see that us from little old Berea had something that these big, Ivy League kids didn’t have, which was the ability to be resilient because of our past failures and having the skills to be able to identify when you’re getting overwhelmed, having that work-life balance as well. When I was in Berea, I did way too much. So now I know what not to do: how to be a worker when you’re at work, a father when you’re home, and then a husband when the kids are asleep. Making sure that you compartmentalize your life so you don’t go crazy—I think that’s what I got from my supervisor.” –Carlos Aguilar ’13*

*“My labor position really taught me how to be empathetic, but also to look at people’s individual strengths and how we can work together best. And so, I carry that with me as someone who does staff supervision all of the time. I was really lucky. In my labor position, I had a labor supervisor that was like my mom away from home. I was nine-plus hours away from home. It was nice to have someone who could be like family but also could lead and guide me at a time that was really pivotal.” –Patty Schreckengost Lee ’06*

*“I remember being a young and silly student who did not understand a lot about life. I was thinking that I have to work because I had to work for my education [and] this school is covering my tuition and room and board. I didn’t see past that. And not until later, looking back, it allowed me to see that the labor experience is more than just covering for my tuition—it’s really teaching me, and it’s really a meaningful experience. I learned a lot; I grew a lot. I’m a part of the community.” –Tran Nguyen ’17*



In a forthcoming American Council on Education (ACE) white paper on “learn and earn” models,<sup>25</sup> interviews with the staff professionals in the Labor Office at Berea College outlined the vital inter-relationship among Labor Program positions, learning outcomes, and students’ future career goals. Those interviews stressed that students tend to have a mix of positions during their years at Berea College. A 2018 report by the Berea College Office of Institutional Research and Assessment surveyed a panel of alumni about their labor positions, categorizing them into three types. Alumni had multiple labor positions during their time at Berea College, so they could select more than one answer when reflecting on their experience. Seventy-five percent of students said at least one of their positions was related to their future career interests. Fifty percent said at least one of their positions was not related. Fifty percent said at least one of their positions was not related to their future careers but related to their personal interests. Alumni indicated significant contributions of the Labor Program to their personal and professional growth, with little differentiation across the three categories of labor positions.<sup>26</sup>

According to these interviews, learning would be enhanced by making the connections between their Labor Program positions and future careers even more evident to students *while they are still studying at Berea College*. Doing so will require us to be even more intentional about collaboration and communication among career development, academic departments, and the Labor Program Office.

*“For me, especially—a poor kid from Appalachia, coming to college as a first-generation college student—I had these aspirations of climbing the corporate ladder: ‘I’m going to be the one to get out, and I’m going to make a million dollars. I’m going to do all of these things.’ But my Berea experience, both in my labor position and in my academic experience—and just being in the community—really solidified for me how important community was. And so now, I’m at this point in my career that what gets me through the really hard stuff of work is that (I work in the small urban Appalachian community of Cincinnati). And every day, what gets me up is that we’re doing this work with our neighbors, for our neighbors, in partnership with our neighbors. Like this morning: We broke ground on 47 units of affordable housing with our neighbors. Being able to center my career has made it a far more enjoyable experience versus just coming to work every day. I carry that with me as I wake up every single morning.” –Patty Schreckengost Lee ’06*

<sup>25</sup> Louis Soares, Vickie Chits, Kelly Rifelj, “Exploring the Work College Model for Working Adults,” ACE Work College Brief (forthcoming), 2022.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.berea.edu/ira/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2018/02/Labor-Program-Experiences-Executive-Summary-January-2018.pdf>.

## The Work College Model

The colleges that comprise the Work Colleges Consortium offer a pathway for traditionally underserved populations to achieve a high-quality education through a variety of “learn and earn” programs, ranging from work-study to co-ops and internships and on-campus labor positions. **These programs differ from work-study positions or merit-based teaching and research assistantships offered at almost all universities and colleges in that *all* students on Work College campuses must participate in the work program.** Students work an average of 8-10 hours a week in a variety of jobs,<sup>27</sup> and at Berea, students earn money for personal expenses and even for housing and meal costs. To gain federal recognition as a “Work College,” an institution must, among other things, have a student work program that is integral to the institution’s educational philosophy; that is required of all students; that has learning objectives, evaluation, and oversight in place for each position; and that provides students with a work-learning-service program that serves the community.<sup>28</sup>

In the early 1970s, Berea College was granted funding from the Educational Foundation of America to refine and share its Labor Program with other colleges that shared a similar mission and demographic base. In 1982, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation funded the initial convening of such institutions (Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, and Warren Wilson), and then in 1987, with funding from the Ford Foundation, the Work Colleges Consortium was established. Five years later, the Higher Education Act instituted the model into law, with federal funding ensuing in 1993.

Berea College’s Labor Program, rooted in the notion of both the nobility of labor and the erasure of class, race, and gender differences, paved the way for a path out of poverty for students seeking a high-quality education. As Fee said in another context, “Revolutions never go backwards.”<sup>29</sup> Berea’s revolutionary approach to inclusivity in higher education continues to evolve.

<sup>27</sup> Jocelyn Pickford, “Earning to Learn: How America’s Work Colleges Are Bridging Equity Gaps and Connecting Education to Employment,” American Enterprise Institute, March 2018, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/earning-to-learn-how-americas-work-colleges-are-bridging-equity-gaps-and-connecting-education-to-employment/>.

<sup>28</sup> For more information, see <https://www.workcolleges.org>.

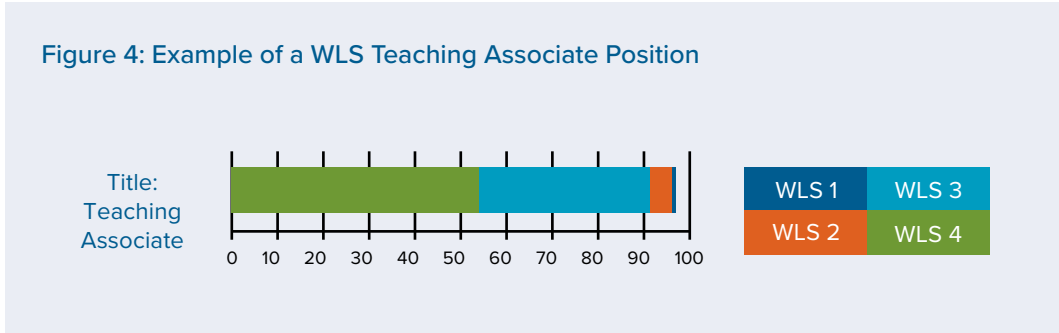
<sup>29</sup> John G. Fee, *Autobiography of John G. Fee, Berea, Kentucky* (Chicago: National Christian Association, 1891), quoting his address to Union soldiers during his exile period.

A Closer Look at the Berea Model

Berea is intentional about the kind of labor positions available to students. Many first-year positions, for example, help students realize not just soft skills but also the dignity of all labor, particularly manual. Upon completing their first-year labor assignment, students are free to move through the Labor Program in ways that can meet their expectations for growth and also to align with their academic interests. Compared to other Work Colleges, Berea employs students as teaching and lab assistants/associates at greater rates. Figure 4<sup>30</sup> shows that over 90 percent of students working as a “Teaching Associate” fell into the WLS 3 and 4 categories, meaning that these positions need little supervision and have great autonomy. Figure 5<sup>31</sup> visually reveals the entry-level positions held by first-year students, from groundskeeper to custodian. The course and lab assistants/associates, conversely, are most frequently staffed by juniors and seniors. There is one final point worth noting: There is no better way to learn a subject than to have to teach it. Involving students in academic instruction as a labor assignment not only supports the faculty in their work, but also enhances the learning experience of students in these positions.

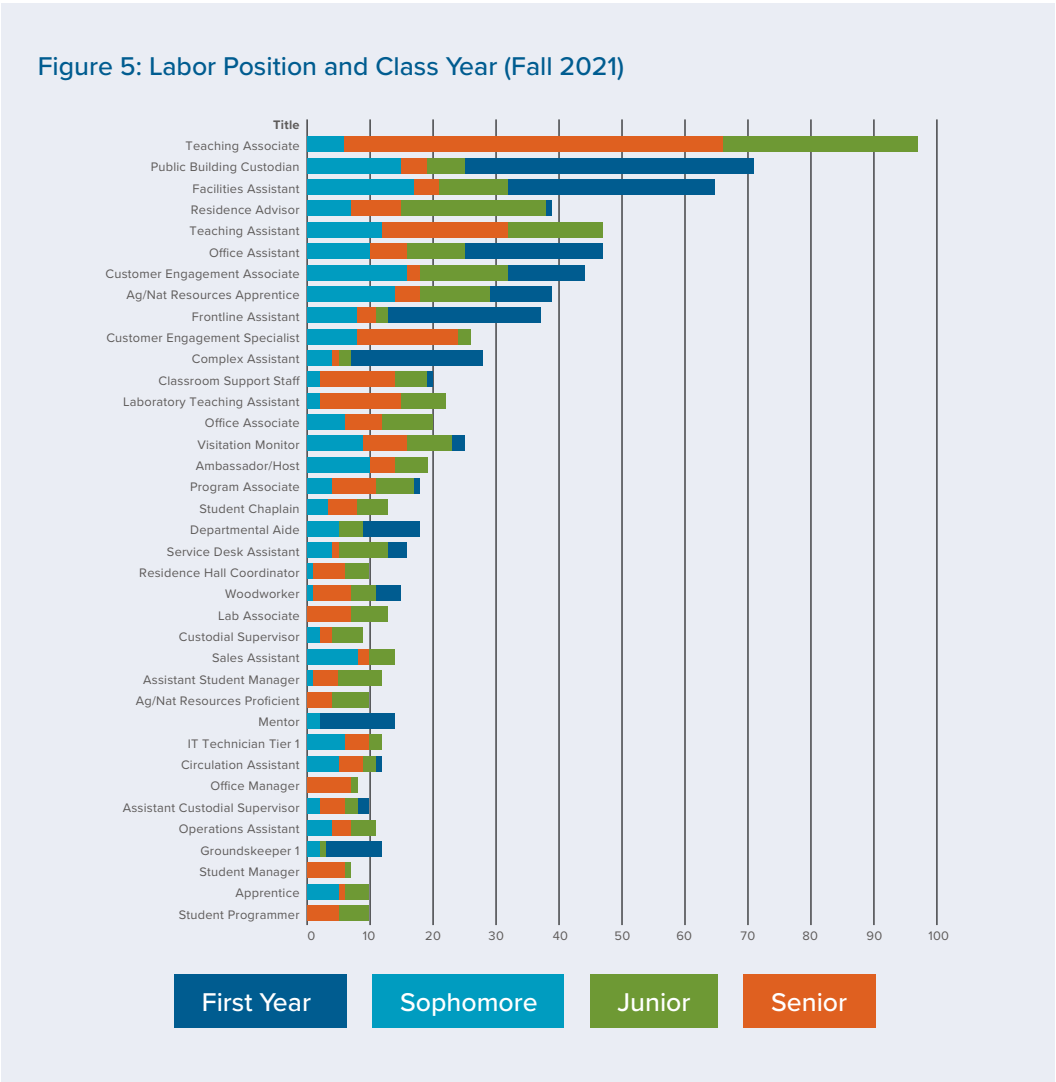
One question that might be asked is, To what extent is there a linkage made between a student’s academic path and the learning goals of the position as a labor position? The forthcoming ACE white paper makes the valid point that the Work College model has not traditionally integrated work placements with academic programs or career pathways. Rather, the Berea model was based, first, on filling needed work positions at the College and in the community and, second, on teaching all students to reevaluate their conceptions of work, which may be inflected by their race-class-gender intersectional lenses. **Ensuring that this large proportion of students receives the requisite training in the supervision and management of others in their positions from a labor perspective is vital.**

Bearing in mind the findings from *How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most*, Berea, perhaps like other liberal arts institutions striving to help prospective students and their families see the relevance and importance of a liberal arts education, will need to continue to help labor supervisors—faculty as well as staff—see the importance of training in the principles of management, team building, and leadership.



<sup>30</sup> Courtesy of Katherine M. Faull.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



**Given the demographic diversity of the Berea College student body, we must highlight the radical and liberatory nature of training traditionally underrepresented groups in management and leadership positions as they enter the workforce.** Workforce success may lie in the qualities of graduates cited in Figure 5, but central to the demographic trends of the twenty-first century is also the ability to manage, train, and lead an increasingly diverse workforce. Berea College graduates already have that in the bag!

The support that Berea offers students, particularly in the Bridge-out programs, helps provide an additional complement to their learning in the classroom and through the Labor Program. Notable here is the internship program, administered by the Office of Internships and Career Development. Funding for a high-quality internship can be the apotheosis of learning in academics and labor positions and serve as a colossal confidence booster to step into the world beyond Berea and feel equipped and prepared. Because Berea provides students not just with an academic transcript but also with a work transcript, the documentation of their years in the Labor Program helps students gain more solid and perhaps more rapid entry into the world of work.



*“I was in the Bonner Program for all four years in the service-learning area. I think one of the things that helped me, and I’ve used in the past 10 years, was how we started out in the Bonner Program. We not only have a supervisor, but we have student coordinators. It was my first experience in an office, getting to know how that work is being managed. Then, I progressed throughout the four years, becoming the student manager, overseeing other students, all through the same mentorship program. I started out as an employee, a young attorney, and then came into more of a supervising role. And those skills translated to how to lead and how to manage people, and then also to be managed, of course.”*

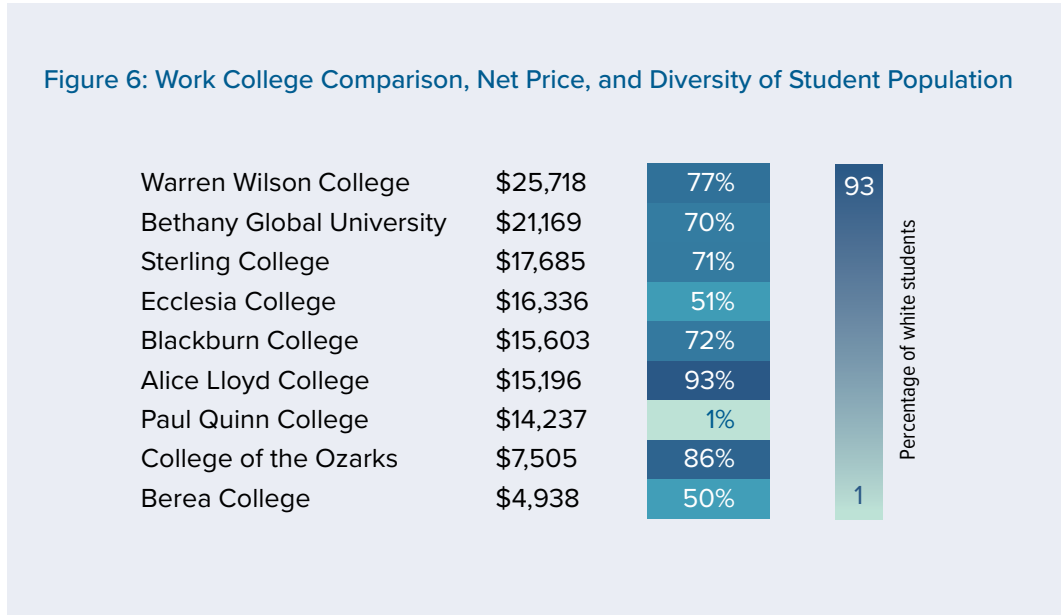
*–Mikita Weaver ’08*

*“I had a varied experience with my labor program, but I knew it was something special when I left a labor position midyear to go to a different one, still in Residence Life. The amount of tears that were shed. And the very last meeting that I facilitated just tells you that it is something very special.... There’s still a group of us who get together every year. And so, in addition to the labor supervisors, it’s also the people you meet in the labor positions that are very impactful. And if you stay in one and continue in the same department, you all grow together. I think a huge component of the labor division are the other students that you work with. I also think, too, that having been to graduate school where there wasn’t a strong work or labor department—just work-study—it’s a very different feel when you know that half of the class or more just goes home after class. They don’t go to a job. And I think that the instruction and the interactions on the campus were all very different. Having that shared component of labor amongst the entire student body...is important.”*

*–Jude Morrissey ’05*

Finally, providing an interracial and gender-inclusive liberal arts education and work program is what Berea does and achieves. Among its peers, **it is unmatched in the fulfillment of the original intention to be truly inclusive**. Figure 6<sup>32</sup> shows how the College has returned, in the post–Day Law era, to a level of student diversity that approaches the intentional Black-white parity of students in the pre–Day Law era. Early Bereans would be proud.<sup>33</sup> **And Berea does this for free**. So in the words of renowned feminist scholar bell hooks, Berea does seem to be the best college to go to if you’re not born rich!

It also does one more thing worth highlighting. Precisely because the students whom Berea serves might need a gentle reminder, given the marginalization from which so many come, **it’s important to demonstrate that they have agency**. A higher education degree, after all, does foster the agency to seek social and economic mobility, along with the freedom that is inherent in that achievement. The required work of a Berea experience also provides that agency. It gives students so many skills (soft ones, for example) and perspectives, often serving to clarify options in the present and future. That is important. That is transformative. That is Berea.



<sup>32</sup> Courtesy of Katherine M. Faull.

<sup>33</sup> Christi M. Smith, in *Reparation and Reconciliation: The Rise and Fall of Integrated Higher Education* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), describes the differences among Berea, Howard, and Oberlin in the nineteenth century: Howard was predominantly Black with a few white students. Oberlin was predominantly white with a few Black students. Berea, though, was intentionally an equal mixture of Black and white students (Black students, in fact, slightly outnumbered white students until about 1893).



Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

Pictured above: Students who work at the Berea College Farm connect to the College's Fourth Great Commitment focused on labor—manual and mental.

*“The supervision and the staff that students get to interact with makes a world of difference and can really turn around a student’s perspective, even if it means that you have...a job scraping plates in dining or wiping the floors. Supervisors really have that power to change a student’s perspective on the work that they’re doing and really emphasize that part of the Fourth Commitment, the dignity of all labor.”*

*—Andreea Teban '19*

*“I learned from my labor supervisors that even in food service, I choose whether or not it’s going to be a good day or a bad day. If I have a crummy attitude every day about it, it’s going to be awful for everybody, and I’m going to shut down a lot of opportunities with my attitude. I learned I need to make the work meaningful first, and then everything else will come from that.”*

*—Jude Morrissey '05*

*“The labor supervisors were very understanding, but they also were very fair. They knew that life would get in the way sometimes, but then they will also be very direct with you and say, ‘Hey, you need to go ahead and get this done or need to do that.’ I felt like they really did prepare you for the real world. I think I’m prepared now because of some of my positions.”*

*—Lederrick Wesley '07*





Pictured: Students at The Pinnacles in the Berea College Forest.

Photo by Anna Jones '17

## Ever Onward in an Uncertain World

**T**he pandemic has changed so much about higher education, and several impacts are notable. It exacerbated, for example, the mental health needs of all students. It increased the disengagement of males seeking higher education, causing some not to enroll, as others who did dropped out. It exposed the inequitable divides of society at all levels, particularly in higher education, even down to those suddenly forced to continue classes remotely at homes with internet service fueled by hundreds of megabits per second versus those who faced remote learning with no bandwidth at all. It intensified the lack of truth in claims based on hearsay or, worse, social media, compared to those grounded in science and truth. Truth, in fact, was often another victim of the pandemic. It worsened the divide between the haves and have-nots in the student population and even in higher education institutions. It disrupted global supply chains and triggered inflation not seen in Western economies in decades. In short, all the persistent and vexing challenges facing higher education seemed to intensify.

**It also changed the world of work.** We began this project to understand and then articulate and amplify the contributions that Berea College could offer to higher education just as the pandemic was beginning. As we commenced that work, we were moved by an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by Thomas Friedman titled “After the Pandemic, a Revolution in Education and Work Awaits.” Friedman began bluntly and provocatively:

The good Lord works in mysterious ways. He (She?) threw a pandemic at us at the exact same time as a tectonic shift in the way we will learn, work and employ. Fasten your seatbelt. When we emerge from this corona crisis, we’re going to be greeted with one of the most profound eras of Schumpeterian creative destruction ever—which this pandemic is both accelerating and disguising.<sup>34</sup>

His words were both a clarion call to and an affirmation of the work in which we were engaged. And then Friedman predicted that the career path in the future “will no longer follow a simple ‘learn-to-work’ trajectory but rather a path of ‘work-learn-work-learn-work-learn.’”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Friedman, “After the Pandemic, a Revolution in Education and Work Awaits,” *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



The power of this quote is indicative of the power of a work experience like Berea's for its students. The many words of Berea alumni all testify to such an experience. And higher education should take notice. Because, in Friedman's conclusion:

There is great potential here—if it is done right. The students get exposed to what is most new by way of innovation technologies and techniques. And the company engineers and executives get exposed to what is most enduring—civics, ethics, theories of justice, principles of democracy, notions of the public good, environmentalism and how to lead a life of purpose.<sup>36</sup>

Those believers in the power of liberal education know this. And there's one more compelling concept on which to close. Randy Bass, from Georgetown University, wisely has written:

As we look to the future, and as machines get better at being machines, the primary purpose of higher education must be helping humans get better at being human. Ultimately technology (machine intelligence) will have its greatest impact on human learning through the evolution in human capacity—the “complementarity”—that will be required to stay ahead of its advance.<sup>37</sup>

A college student who has experienced Friedman's work-learn-work-learn-work-learn form of learning has already experienced this “complementarity” and can continue to grow in its attainment.

Our students and, indeed, our whole society need us to rise to this challenge.

May it be so.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Randy Bass, “The Impact of Technology on the Future of Human Learning,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 50:3-4 (2018), 34-39, DOI: 10.1080/00091383.2018.1507380.

*“I hope the College will continue to strike a balance between equipping students with cutting-edge skills and the traditional softer skills that they also glean from the Labor Program. I think it's just inherent in the experience: the communication, the teamwork, the learning across difference engaging with people of different backgrounds. You know, it's the kind of thing where you could talk to an alum from the '50s who worked at Boone Tavern [Hotel and Restaurant] or who worked in the printing press at the time. Those are the skills that they carried with them from their time at Berea. It's a balance that the institution can continue to aim for and continue to help students understand how they can market these; then when they leave Berea, they have both practical hands-on skills and the soft skills that employers are going to be looking for.”*

*—Mary Galloway '07*

*“I always had a very direct relationship talking to my supervisors, and they had a very direct relationship in how they talked with me. I felt more prepared and able to talk to my supervisors and say, ‘Hey, this is working,’ or ‘Hey, this isn't working,’ or ask questions because Berea encourages you to ask questions. And there's a lot of educational cultures out there that just don't.”* *—Anita “Beth” Coleman '09*





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