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Work-Based Learning: Who Gets Paid?

DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE 2025
STATE OPPORTUNITY INDEX



Work-Based Learning: Who Gets Paid?

Nichole Torpey-Saboe and
Akua Amankwah-Ayeh

Higher education has long been viewed as a pathway to opportunity, but access and completion are not enough to ensure strong economic and social returns. Success beyond completion must be the new goal, with a sharper focus on helping people enter careers that pay well and offer opportunities for growth and fulfillment.

In fall 2025, Strada Education Foundation released the second edition of the State Opportunity Index (SOI), which benchmarks state progress across five key areas that strengthen connections between education and opportunity. This report focuses on one of those areas, work-based learning, which is linked to better early career outcomes, including higher earnings and greater likelihood of securing college-level employment. As part of the SOI, states are benchmarked using student-reported participation in at least one of five types of paid work-based learning at public two- and four-year institutions. These experiences include paid internships, paid apprenticeships, paid co-ops, paid practica, and paid undergraduate research experiences. States with a sufficient sample size of respondents are characterized as Leading (75%+ participation), Advanced (50–74%), Developing (25–49%), or Foundational (less than 25% participation) based on their progress.

Despite growing recognition of the value of work-based learning, access remains uneven. Nationally, only 43 percent of students at public four-year institutions report at least one of these experiences, and most states fall into the Developing category. At public two-year institutions, participation rates are lower still, with most states classified as Foundational.

Building on the state-by-state analyses in the SOI, this brief examines national participation patterns across demographic groups and institution types, highlighting key areas of strength and areas where targeted support may be beneficial.

Methodology

Strada partnered with College Pulse, Trellis Strategies, RTI, and Generation Lab to conduct an online survey to collect data on work-based learning experiences among students at public two-year institutions (all students excluding dual enrollment students) and seniors (students in their last year of study) at public four-year institutions.

The data are representative at national and state levels by race/ethnicity, gender, and field of study. The survey was fielded from February–July 2025. Four-year data are available for 39 states (n=41,531), and two-year data are available for 25 states (n=15,079).

The analyses in this brief focus on four-year students in their last year of study (n=38,781) and a subset of the two-year sample: two-year students in their last year of study who indicated that they plan to work after their graduation or have already secured a position, rather than pursue additional education (n=3,008). This subpopulation of two-year students was chosen to focus on those for whom their associate degree is meant to lead directly toward a career rather than those who are pursuing transfer on the pathway to a bachelor's degree.^{1,2}

1 This brief does not report data for populations with sample sizes fewer than 100 unless otherwise noted.

2 In charts, an * denotes a statistically significant difference from the mean or from the comparison group (p<0.05).



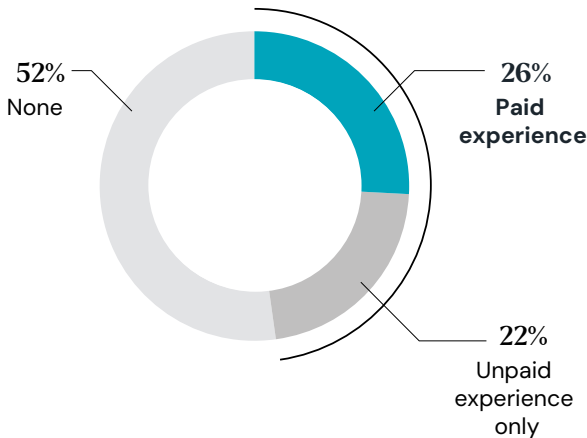
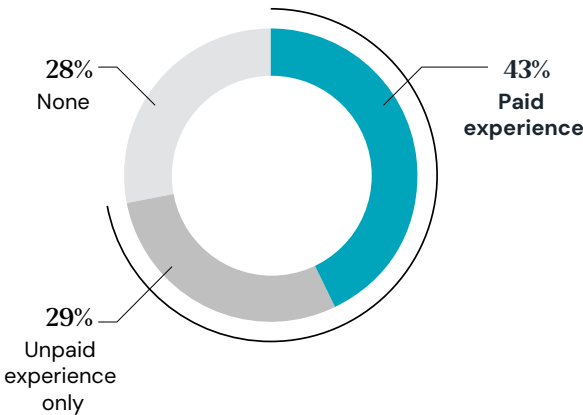
Finding 1: Participation in paid work-based learning experiences is limited.

Although 43 percent of four-year and 26 percent of two-year graduating students participate in a paid work-based learning experience, far more – 72 percent and 48 percent, respectively – engage in work-based learning when unpaid experiences also are considered. This finding highlights that closing the gap on participation in work-based learning experiences

means both expanding participation for those who are not having any experience at all and adding pay to experiences that are often unpaid. Paid experiences are associated with strong employment and earnings outcomes, and lack of compensation can limit access to these opportunities for some students.

Figure 1: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions

Figure 2: Work-based learning participation at two-year public institutions



Finding 2: Paid work-based learning varies strongly by field of study.

A majority of four-year graduating students across all majors participate in some form of work-based learning, but participation in paid experiences is uneven. Students in majors in which practica or research experiences are the standard, such as education and health professions, are less likely to have had a paid experience compared with internship-heavy fields such as engineering and business. Overall participation

(including paid and unpaid experiences) is more even across fields of study.³ At the two-year level, participation is lower across the board, particularly for education, health professions, and liberal arts majors. Two-year students are more likely than their peers at four-year institutions to be working full time, which may make work-based learning participation especially difficult.

Figure 3: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by field of study

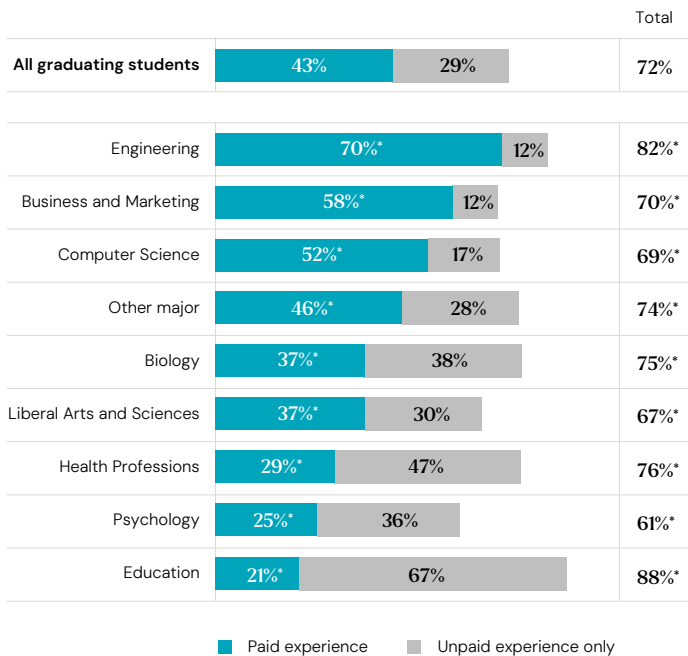
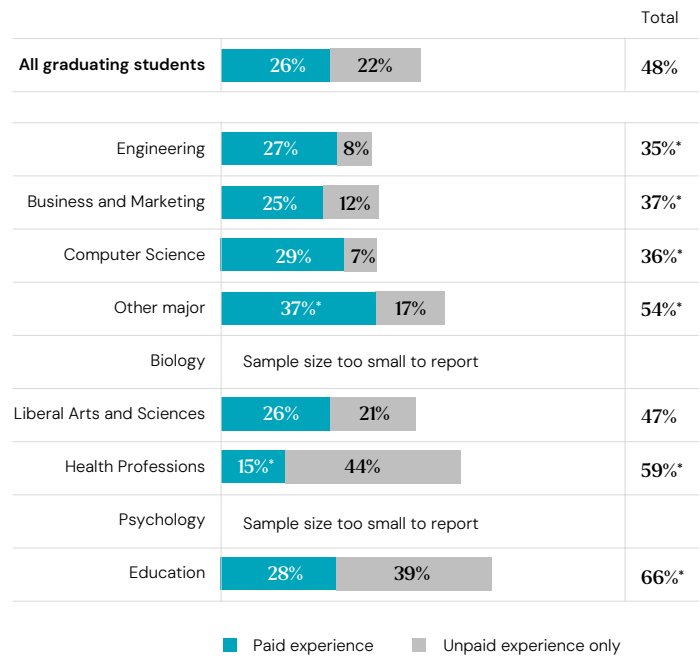


Figure 4: Work-based learning participation at two-year public institutions, by field of study



³ "Other major" includes a variety of fields of study that were not included in the other categories. The largest among these are agriculture, health-related knowledge and skills, legal professions, and architecture.

Finding 3: First-generation students and women are less likely to experience paid work-based learning.

First-generation students (students whose parents do not hold college degrees) and women are less likely than continuing-generation students and men to have a paid experience. There also are large differences across

racas and ethnicities, with American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander four-year students less likely relative to students overall to have had a paid work-based learning experience.

Figure 5: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by gender and first-generation status

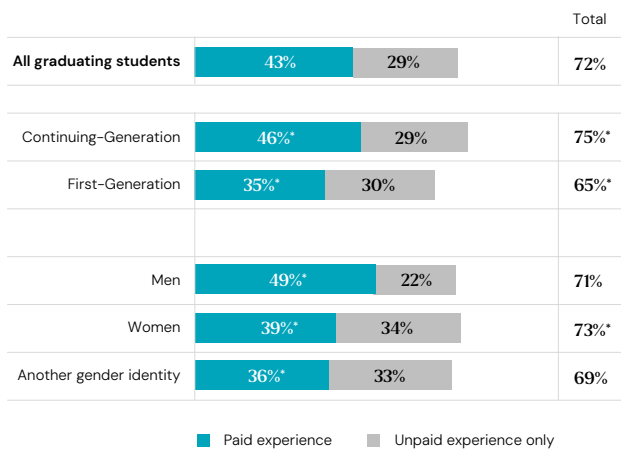


Figure 6: Work-based learning participation at two-year public institutions, by gender and first-generation status

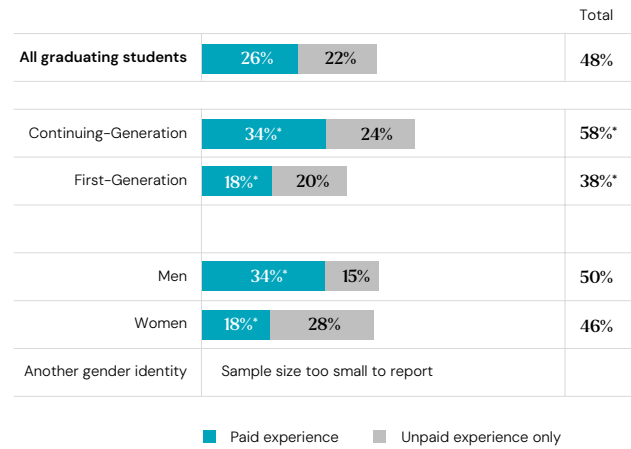


Figure 7: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by race and ethnicity

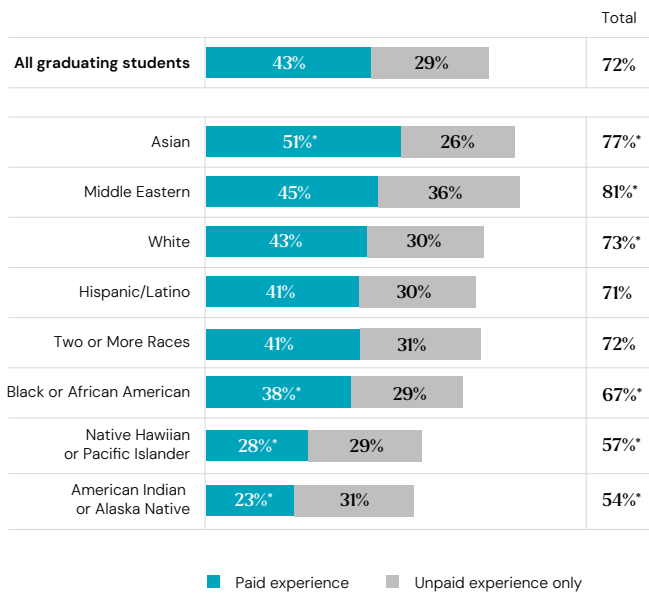
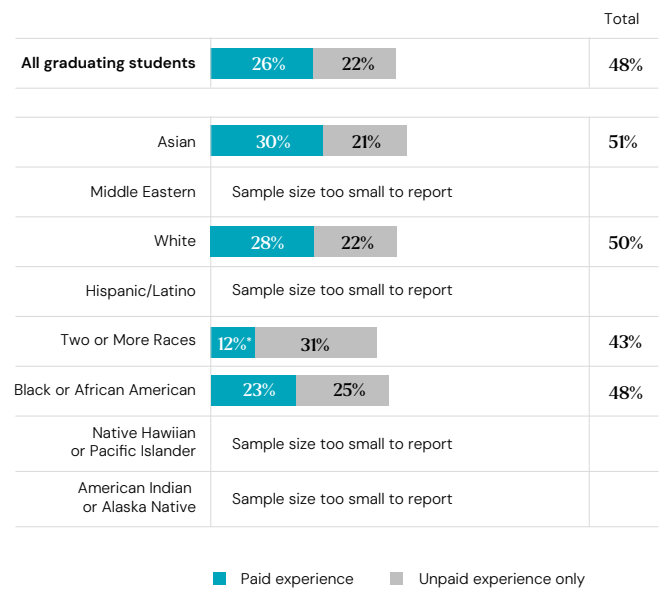


Figure 8: Work-based learning participation at two-year public institutions, by race and ethnicity





At both four- and two-year levels, first-generation graduating students have lower participation rates across all majors. This is especially true for internship-heavy majors such as engineering, business and marketing, and computer science, where first-generation

graduating students lag behind their continuing generation peers in paid work-based learning participation by upward of 10 percent. Differences are smaller in health professions and education majors.

Figure 9: Paid work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by first-generation status and field of study

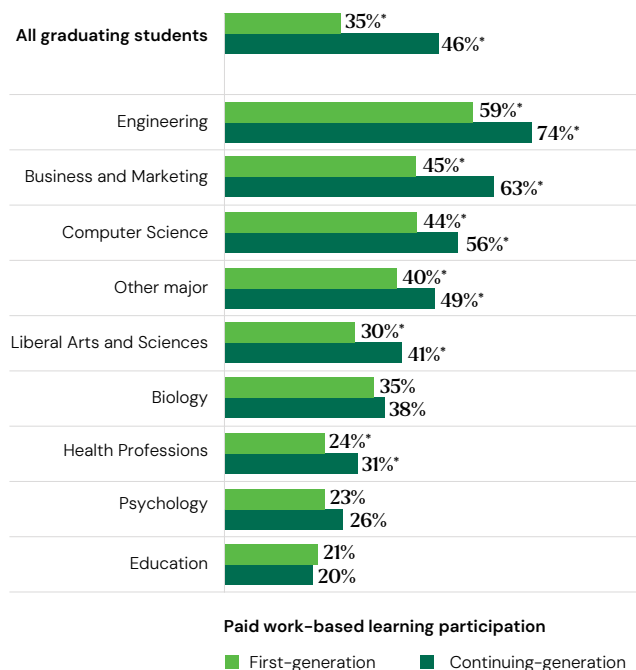
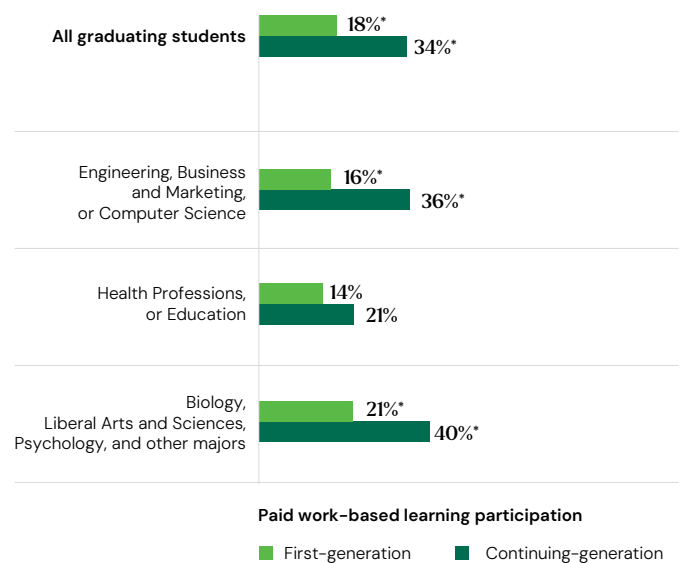


Figure 10: Paid work-based learning participation at two-year public institutions, by first-generation status and field of study



Although women have lower participation rates overall, at the four-year level, much of this difference seems to be explained by differences in field of study. However, at

the two-year level, gender gaps in paid experiences persist across fields of study.

Figure 11: Paid work-based learning participation at public four-year institutions, by gender and field of study.

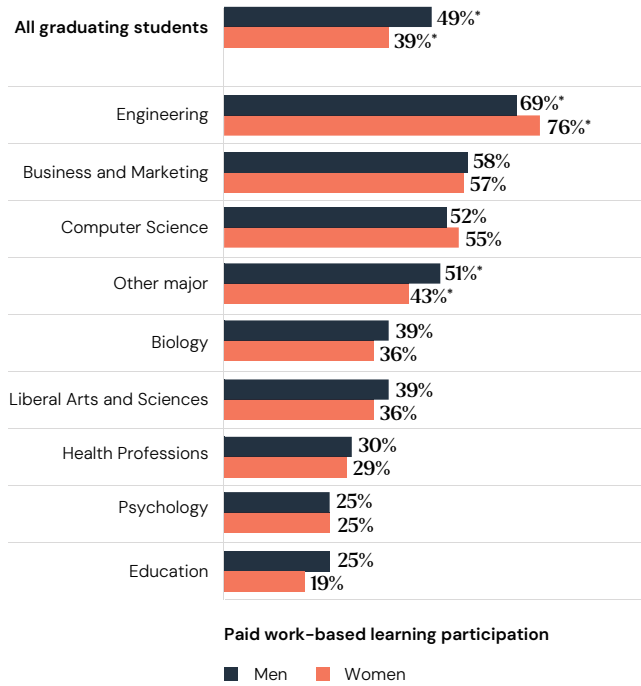


Figure 12: Gender distribution by field of study at public four-year institutions

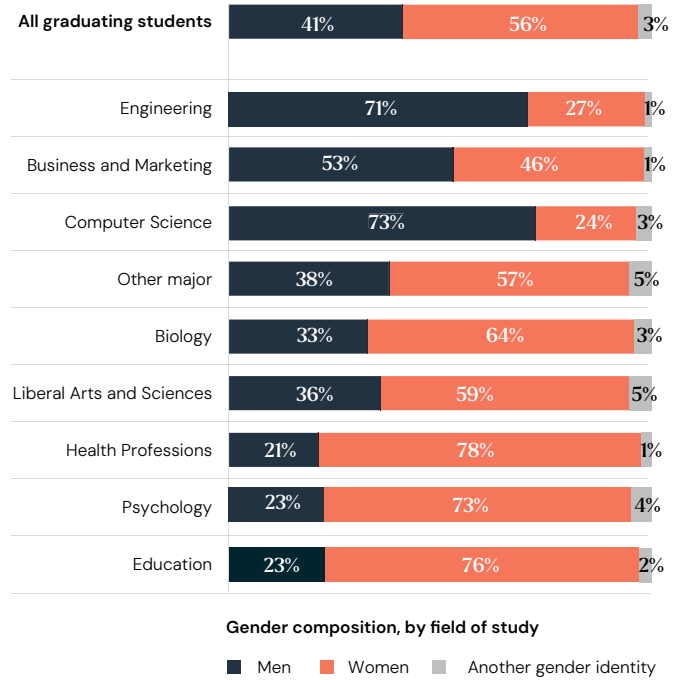


Figure 13: Paid work-based learning participation at public two-year institutions, by gender and field of study.

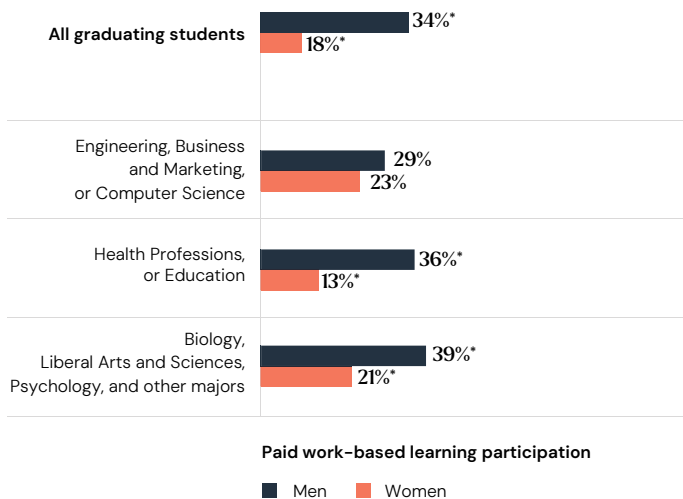
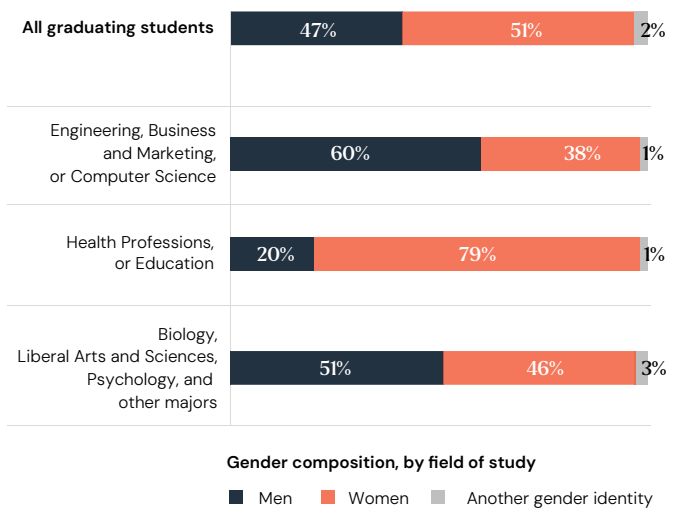


Figure 14: Gender distribution by field of study at public two-year institutions





Finding 4: Students at better-resourced and more selective institutions are more likely to have a paid work-based learning experience.

Graduating students from institutions with higher spending per student are more likely to have paid experiences than those at institutions with lower spending per student (51% vs. 33%).

Figure 15: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by spending per student (instructional and student services, spending quartiles)

			Total
Highest spending	51%*	28%	79%*
Medium-high spending	49%*	28%	77%*
Medium-low spending	43%*	31%	74%*
Lowest spending	33%*	31%	64%*

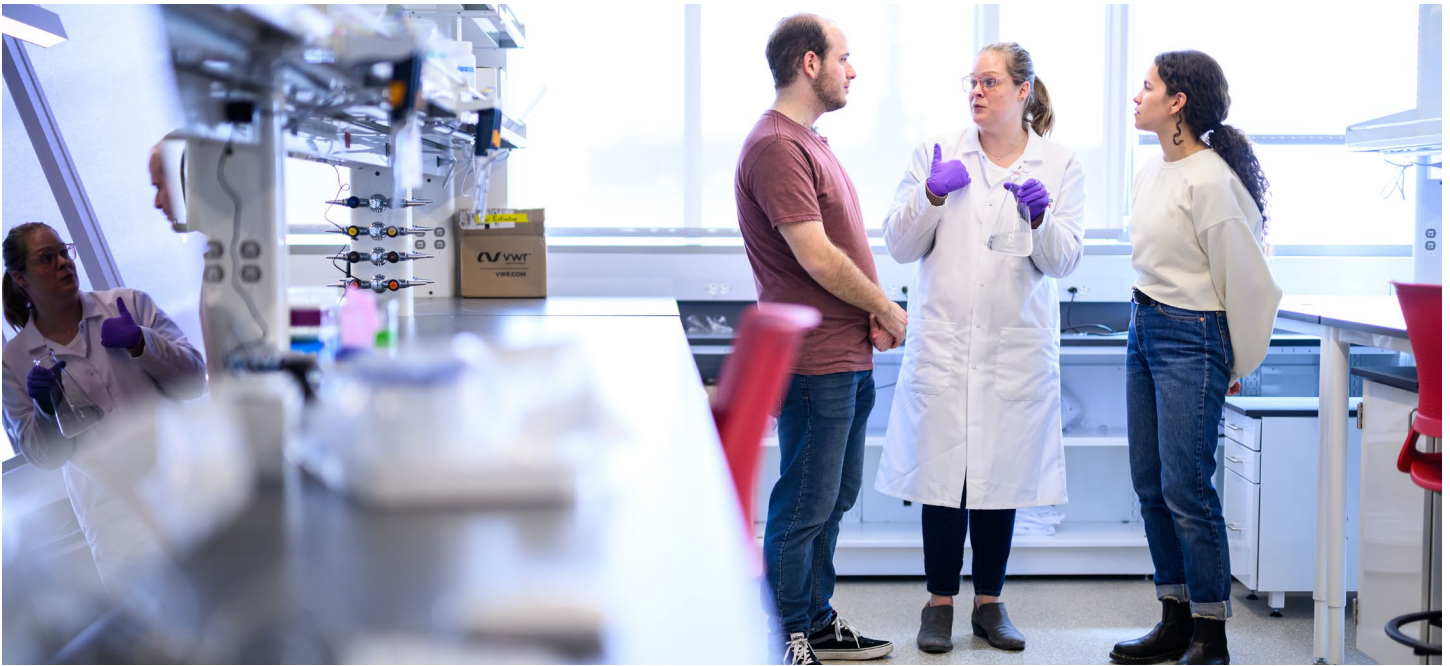
■ Paid experience ■ Unpaid experience only

Selectivity also is associated with higher participation in paid work-based learning, with 50 percent of students at the most selective institutions completing a paid work-based learning experience compared to fewer than 4 in 10 students at institutions with lower levels of selectivity.

Figure 16: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by selectivity (quartiles based on admissions rate and average SAT score)

			Total
Highest selectivity	50%*	27%	77%*
Medium-high selectivity	39%*	31%	70%*
Medium-low selectivity	36%*	34%	70%*
Lowest selectivity	33%*	32%	65%*

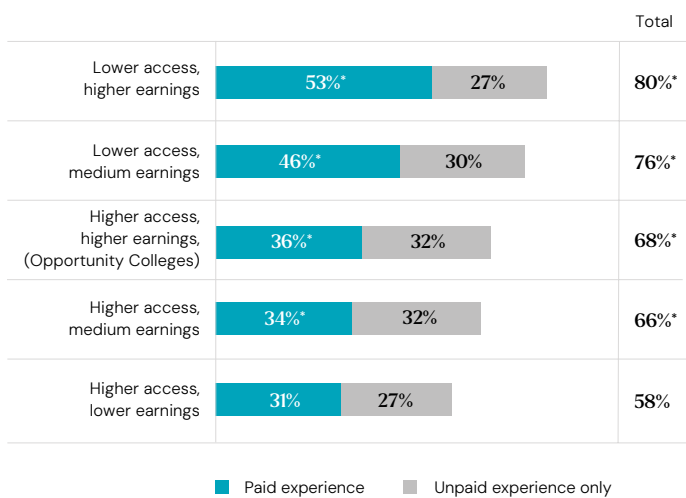
■ Paid experience ■ Unpaid experience only



Examining trends across Carnegie Classifications reveals similar patterns.⁴ Students at lower access institutions (less representative of the geography they serve in terms of race and income) are more likely to participate in paid work-based learning than their peers at higher access institutions. At every level of access, higher participation in paid work-based learning is associated with higher earnings among graduates.

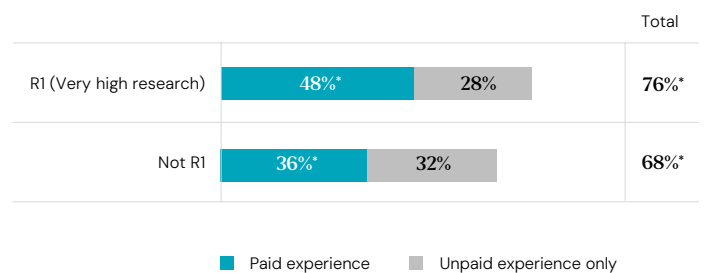
Finally, students at institutions with very high research activity are more than 10 percentage points more likely to participate in paid work-based learning than students at institutions with lower levels of research activity.

Figure 17: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by access and earnings classification



Please note that the category "Higher access, lower earnings" has a sample size of fewer than 100.

Figure 18: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by research classification



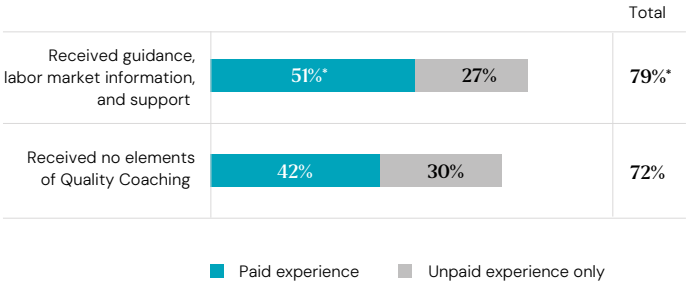
4 The Carnegie Classification is the most widely used framework for describing and classifying U.S. institutions of higher education. This analysis uses the classifications on research activity, as measured by research expenditures and doctorates awarded, and access and earnings. Access and earnings classifications compare the demographics and post-college earnings of the student body at each institution to that of the population in the state or metropolitan area from which students are drawn.



Finding 5: Quality Coaching is associated with higher participation in paid experiences.

Quality Coaching includes three elements: personalized education-to-career guidance, access to timely labor market information, and support. Graduating students of four-year institutions who receive all three elements of Quality Coaching are more likely to have paid work-based learning experiences. Notably, Quality Coaching is not more prevalent at well-resourced or highly selective institutions.

Figure 19: Work-based learning participation at four-year public institutions, by experience with quality coaching





Taken together, these findings suggest that participation in paid work-based learning is shaped not only by student interest and employer demand, but also by institutional capacity to build employer partnerships and support students in securing these opportunities. To ensure that every student can participate in a paid experience, states and institutions may want to consider:

- 1. Prioritizing the collection of data on participation in paid work-based learning to identify the specific gaps present in individual institutions and within state systems.**
- 2. Targeting resources to develop and fund paid work-based experiences in fields of study that have fewer paid opportunities — such as the liberal arts and sciences, in which unpaid internships and research experience are more common — and education and health fields, in which practica have traditionally been unpaid.**
- 3. Focusing state strategies on institutions with fewer resources to increase the overall percentage of those participating in paid work-based learning before graduation.**
- 4. Expanding all three elements of Quality Coaching for students by discipline or first-generation status to help students with no prior paid work-based learning experience get their first experience.**