

# Sharing College Knowledge: Introducing Historically Underrepresented First-Year Students to the Expectations of Academic Good Work

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## Authors' Note

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*While undergraduate enrollment is increasing among historically underrepresented students, completion rates remain lower than their peers. A lack of college knowledge may be partly responsible. We used Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon's (2001) Good Work model to develop 2 programs to introduce historically underrepresented students to the expectations of college, that is, to improve their college knowledge. Assessment data (n = 44 in Program 1; n = 50 in Program 2) showed that while the programs were only somewhat effective at improving students' understanding of what it means to do academic good work, students valued participating in the program.*

**Keywords:** *Good Work, first-year undergraduates, historically underrepresented students, orientation, transition, retention, college knowledge*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), approximately two-thirds of U.S. adults between 25 and 34 years old have some college experience, with 36% having earned at least a bachelor's degree. The value of a college degree is clear. College graduates are more likely to be employed, earn more money, exhibit physical health, and show increased civic involvement (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

The U.S. Department of Education's (2016) call to increase historically underrepresented individuals' access to higher education has been effective. For example, enrollment rates for Black and Hispanic high school graduates have increased (Ma et al., 2016). Nevertheless, enrollment gaps exist between Black and Hispanic high school graduates and their White peers.

Further, although the percentage of individuals between 25 and 34 years old with at least bachelor's degrees has increased over time, there are disparities in completion rates among Black (24% women, 19% men), Hispanic (18% women, 13% men), and White (45% women, 38% men) students (Ma et al., 2016). In addition, low-income high school graduates are less likely to enroll immediately in college (58%) compared to their peers from middle-income (62%) or high-income (82%) families. Moreover, undergraduate students from low-income families demonstrate lower completion rates than their peers (Ma et al., 2016). Further, first-generation students show lower enrollment (72%) compared to those whose parents attended some college (84%) or earned a bachelor's degree (93%) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). First-generation students are also less likely to attain a degree (48%) compared to students whose parents attended some college (53%) or whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (67%).

As the national conversation has shifted from educational access to educational attainment, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) has called for more resources and increased use of best practices to improve college students' success. First-year seminars are a high-impact practice shown to help incoming first-year students orient and transition to college (Kuh, 2008). Often, these courses target students' college knowledge, or understanding of the expectations of higher education (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Lack of college knowledge (i.e., expectations, language, values, beliefs, behaviors) may hinder student success (Oliveri, Funke, Clark, & Seifert, 2018). Another obstacle may be a scarcity of mentors to help students understand how the academic demands of college differ from those of high school (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Cultural navigators (i.e., faculty, staff, coaches, advanced students) with experience in higher education can help students apply their own cultural backgrounds to navigate the rigors of college (Strayhorn, 2015).

Our goal was to design programming to improve underrepresented first-year students' college knowledge while also providing these students with access to cultural navigators. We developed two programs and embedded them into first-year seminars. Our program was based on the concept of Good Work (Gardner et al., 2001), a model we previously used to introduce first-year students to college knowledge through Summer Assignments (Duncan & Johnson, 2014; Johnson & Duncan, 2013; Johnson, Duncan, & Schoener, 2015). Gardner and colleagues (2001) defined professional good work as excellent (superior quality), ethical (socially responsible), and engaged (fulfilling). These characteristics are referred to as the three E's. We translated the model to academic good work and defined excellent as demonstrating deep understanding of course material and earning outstanding grades, ethical as following the rules of academic integrity, and engaged as finding fulfillment and meaning in one's studies. We believed that the Good Work model would provide a useful framework for sharing information about our academic community's norms and expectations.

## Program 1

### Method

**Participants.** Of 168 ACT 101/Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) first-year students enrolled at a public, 4-year university in rural northeastern Pennsylvania, 140 who were enrolled in a first-year seminar participated. ACT 101/EOP is a state-funded program serving financially, culturally, socially, or educationally disadvantaged (i.e., historically underrepresented) students. The cohort included 63% women, 88% racial/ethnic minorities, and 62% first-generation students.

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**Materials and procedure.** The Academic Good Work Program (AGWP) was approved by our University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To assess students' pre-program understanding of academic good work, all participants wrote responses to the following questions during class time in the third week of the Fall semester:

Question 1: Describe what it means to do good work as a student at Bloomsburg University.

Question 2: Briefly describe an example of good work by a Bloomsburg University student, faculty, or staff, and how the example demonstrates good work.

Participants were then randomly assigned to the AGWP ( $n = 70$ ) or control group ( $n = 70$ ). The control group attended the traditional first-year seminar 50 min per week for the next 6 weeks. AGWP participants were split into seven smaller groups that met with two near-peer facilitators (senior Psychology majors) and a faculty/staff facilitator 50 min per week for the next 6 weeks in lieu of attending the first-year seminar. Facilitators (i.e., cultural navigators) were given scripts to follow.

During Week 1 of the AGWP, participants wrote responses to: "What does it mean to do excellent work as an undergraduate student?" Responses prompted a 15-min group discussion. Participants then discussed excellence as it related to a case study, "To Print or Not to Print," about a high school newspaper editor deciding whether to print a controversial story about her high school. Case studies were from the Good Work Toolkit (Fischman & Barendsen, 2010), a free resource ([thegoodproject.org](http://thegoodproject.org)) designed for young people. During Week 2, AGWP participants discussed: "Who is/are your role models of excellence and why?" and "How have you demonstrated excellence in your role as an undergraduate student?"

Weeks 3 and 4 followed the same format but focused on ethical work. AGWP participants wrote and discussed responses to: "What does it mean to do ethical work as an undergraduate student?" Because participants were hesitant to participate during Weeks 1 and 2, facilitators used the think-pair-share technique (Lyman, 1981) for this and subsequent discussions. Participants then discussed another Good Work case study, "Beyond the Science Club," about a high school scientist who withheld information about her research in order to win a college scholarship. To encourage discussion, participants were randomly divided into two groups—one in support of and one against the scientist's decision. During Week 4, participants shared their responses to: "Who is/are your role models of ethics and why?" and "How have you demonstrated ethics in your role as an undergraduate student?"

Weeks 5 and 6 focused on engaged work. AGWP participants wrote and discussed responses to: "What does it mean to do engaging work as an undergraduate?" Next, participants discussed the Good Work case study, "Empathy: How Much is too Much?," about a 27-year-old nurse who described her intense commitment to her work. During Week 6, participants discussed: "Who is/are your role models of engagement and why?" and "How have you demonstrated engagement in your role as an undergraduate student?"

To assess students' post-program understanding of academic good work, all participants responded to the same pre-program Questions 1 and 2 during class time the following week. In addition, AGWP participants answered:

Question 3: What has been the value of participating in the Good Work Initiative?

Question 4: Overall, how would you rate the Good Work Initiative?  
(Poor, Below Average, Average, Above Average, Excellent)

Question 5: How likely would you be to recommend Good Work Initiative reflective sessions to a friend? (Not At All, Somewhat, Very Likely)

**Data analysis.** Responses to Questions 1, 2, and 3 were independently coded by the authors. In most cases, the authors agreed on coding. When they disagreed, they discussed responses until reaching agreement. Responses to Question 1 and 2 were combined (i.e., if a participant referenced excellence, ethics, or engagement in either response, credit was given). Also, responses that included synonyms such as, but not limited to, the following words were given credit:

Excellence: high quality, outstanding work, high grades, Dean's List

Ethics: protecting the academic integrity of the University, being honest, not cheating

Engagement: finding enjoyment, meaning, or fulfillment in one's work

Questions 4 and 5 were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

## Results and Discussion

**Inclusion criteria.** AGWP participants who completed the pre- and post-program assessments and at least one session about each E were included (n = 44; 63%). Control group participants who completed both assessments (n = 46; 66%) were included.

**Pre-program findings.** Overall, participants rarely alluded to the three E's in their pre-program responses even when Questions 1 and 2 were combined. Excellence was referenced by 9% of AGWP participants and 7% of control group participants, but no one in either group referenced ethics or engagement. This finding may suggest a lack of understanding of the academic community's norms and expectations (i.e., college knowledge). Two other themes did emerge in participants' responses. Effort (e.g., working hard, trying one's best) was mentioned by 34% of AGWP participants and 59% of the control group, and helping others (e.g., volunteering, community service) was mentioned by 41% of AGWP participants and 46% of the control group.

**Post-program findings.** Promisingly, 30% of AGWP participants (versus no control group participants) mentioned ethics in post-program Questions 1 and 2 combined. This is notable as no AGWP participants mentioned ethics in their pre-program responses, and the participants had only discussed ethical work during two 50 min sessions. Unfortunately, AGWP participants' mention of excellence (14% versus 11% control) and engagement (14% versus 0% in control) did not markedly increase, suggesting the need for us to revise future programming. Also, AGWP participants increased their mention of effort (61%). We thought that students may have confused effort (trying one's best) with excellence (achieving high quality work), a misconception we attempted to remedy in Program 2. We also noticed that AGWP participants decreased mention of helping others (7%), suggesting a refinement of their understanding of good work. Further analysis suggested mention of helping others was a cohort effect related to students' volunteerism in response to severe flooding in our town during the time of data collection.

**Perceived value of AGWP.** Five themes emerged from Question 3 regarding the perceived value of the AGWP. Participants valued:

- (1) Learning the three E's (e.g., "Good Work is ethical, excellent, engaging work that you can be proud of").
- (2) Learning how to be better students (e.g., "You learned more about yourself, what you can do to better yourself, and be a better student.").

- (3) Self-reflecting (e.g., “It opens your eyes to role models in your life.”).
- (4) Sharing their views in a group setting (e.g., “The value has been being able to participate in a small group and talk. Share some of the same ideas.”).
- (5) Hearing others’ views (e.g., “I’ve learned different perspectives from different students.”).

AGWP participants’ median rating of the program (Question 4) was above average. Participants’ median likelihood of recommending the program to a friend (Question 5) was somewhat, and their modal response was very likely. Given that students valued participating in the AGWP, we implemented a revised program the following year.

## Program 2

### Method

**Participants.** Of 218 first-year ACT 101/EOP students, we invited all 130 who were enrolled in a first-year seminar to participate. The cohort included 50% women, 89% racial/ethnic minorities, and 52% first-generation students.

**Materials and procedure.** We obtained IRB approval to conduct Program 2. All participants were invited to complete an online pre-program survey:

- (1) Describe what you think it means to do good work in terms of your academic schoolwork as a student at Bloomsburg University.
- (2) Provide an example of when you witnessed another student at Bloomsburg University perform academic good work. Why do you consider this example good work?
- (3) Provide an example of when you have performed academic good work at Bloomsburg University. Why do you consider this example good work?

On the next page of the survey, participants responded to the following items and were asked to provide an example for each:

- (4) Describe what it means to do EXCELLENT academic work as a Bloomsburg University student.
- (5) Describe what it means to do ETHICAL academic work as a Bloomsburg University student.
- (6) Describe what it means to be ENGAGED in your academic work as a Bloomsburg University student.

Participants were then split into 15 small groups with each group assigned a faculty/staff facilitator. Groups met 3 consecutive weeks for 50 min. Facilitators received scripts (available at [goodwork.bloomu.edu](http://goodwork.bloomu.edu)).

During Week 1, facilitators reviewed the three E’s. [Note: All first-year students were introduced to Good Work through a Summer Assignment and Freshman Orientation (Johnson & Duncan, 2013)].

Facilitators encouraged participants to apply the three E's to their own lives and to differentiate each E from common misconceptions. For example, participants were encouraged to think of times when they had tried their hardest (i.e., effort) but did not achieve excellence. Participants then analyzed their pre-written "Me at My Academic Best" essays for mention of the three E's. Participants shared their analyses with the group.

Facilitators began Week 2 by sharing a story about how their role model of academic good work demonstrated the three E's. Then, participants analyzed essays they had written about their role models of academic good work. Participants discussed how the three E's were demonstrated by their role models.

In preparation for Week 3, participants completed an online Values Inventory (based on Schwartz, 1992). Participants chose up to three of 10 values they deemed most important to them. Then, they wrote an essay describing an academic event that required moral courage (i.e., willingness to endure hardship for the sake of principle), and how their most important values influenced their behavior. Participants discussed their essays with the group and considered how their most important values helped them demonstrate the three E's.

During the next week, participants completed an online post-program survey, which included the same six questions as the pre-program survey. Participants also answered:

- (7) What value, if any, did you find in participating in the good work discussion sessions?

**Data analysis.** Survey responses were independently coded by the authors using the same procedure summarized in Program 1.

## Results and Discussion

**Inclusion criteria.** Participants who completed the pre- and post-program surveys and attended at least two of three reflective sessions were included (n = 50; 38.5%).

**Pre-program findings.** Regarding pre-program concepts of academic good work, if participants referenced excellence, ethics, engagement, or related synonyms in Questions 1, 2, or 3, they received credit. While 42% of participants referenced excellence, only 6% mentioned ethics or engagement. When asked to define the three E's in Questions 4, 5, and 6, 36% appropriately defined excellence, 28% defined ethics, and 23% defined engaged. Participants' inability to appropriately define good work and the three E's was somewhat surprising given they were introduced to the concepts in a Summer Assignment and Freshman Orientation (Johnson & Duncan, 2013). However, the results echo Program 1 findings that most participants did not appropriately define good work even after six 50 min sessions. These data suggest that students' deep understanding of the concept of academic good work may require longer term and more widespread embedding of the message into the culture of higher education both in and out of the classroom. In addition, undergraduate institutions might consider undertaking efforts to build college knowledge earlier through outreach programs and/or formal initiatives with area high schools. For example, Hooker and Brand (2010) describe programs that build college knowledge (e.g., Early College High Schools and Citizen Schools) in order to introduce and reinforce higher education's norms and expectations so that high school graduates are prepared to apply their college knowledge upon transitioning to postsecondary institutions.

**Post-program findings.** Regarding the concept of academic good work (Questions 1, 2, and 3 combined), mention of excellence (42%) remained the same as pre-program, while mention of ethics and engagement only increased to 20% and 18% respectively. This echoes Program 1 findings that college knowledge is not easily changed in a few short sessions. Also, similar to Program 1 findings, effort was a common theme in participants' conceptualization of good work (76% pre-program; 64% post-program), even after explicitly requiring students to differentiate effort and excellence in Program 2. Although effort is not part of the Good Work model, persistence and determination are means by which most people achieve excellence. We suggest cultural navigators should recognize effort as a starting point for introducing first-year students to excellence, and that future programs should devote more time to distinguishing the two concepts.

When asked to define the three E's (Questions 4, 5, and 6), post-program responses improved. For excellence, mention of high quality work (33%) and effort (25%) did not change, however, a promising new theme of "be better than average" emerged (35%). Also promising was that participants correctly defined ethics (52%) and engagement (40%) nearly twice as often compared to pre-program responses. These findings suggest modifications to Program 2 were somewhat successful.

**Perceived value of Program 2.** Regarding the value of participating in Program 2, participants mentioned four of the same themes found in Program 1. They valued:

- (1) Learning the three E's.
- (2) Learning how to be better students.
- (3) Self-reflecting.
- (4) Sharing their views in a group setting.

## Conclusions

The mission of our university's Good Work Initiative is to explore undergraduates' concepts of what it means to do academic good work, to build upon this understanding, and to support students' pursuit of academic good work. To this end, we developed two Academic Good Work Programs to introduce college knowledge and provide cultural navigators to historically underrepresented students in a first-year seminar. The programs included an introduction to academic good work, which was inspired by Gardner et al.'s (2001) model of professional Good Work. In sum, we learned that participants conceptualized academic good work as effort and that their definitions of excellence, ethics, and engagement did not align well with those of the Good Work model or our academic community. Our findings suggest that students' deep understanding of the concept of academic good work may require a more sustained and widespread embedding of the concept into the culture of higher education both in and out of the classroom. In addition, undergraduate institutions might consider undertaking efforts to build college knowledge earlier through outreach programs and/or formal initiatives with area high schools. Nevertheless, we were encouraged by participants' reports of the value of participating in the Good Work reflective sessions. Specifically, they reported being inspired to pursue academic good work and they valued the opportunity to self-reflect on how to succeed in higher education. In her writing on the value of Good Work reflective sessions, Farrell (2010, p. 246) stated, "For many students, the pace of life and the commanding expectations of family, peers, and their institutions make it challenging to know what guiding questions to ask of themselves - much less make time to wrestle with them." Good Work reflective sessions, such as those presented in this paper, may allow students to critically examine their definitions of academic success and the methods by which they pursue their academic goals. It is our hope that, by doing so, students will be able to more clearly and boldly mark the path to academic success.



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