
“I Know What It’s Like to Struggle”:
**The Working Lives of Young Students in an Urban
Community College** *by Stuart Tannock and Sara Flocks*

“It’s ironic that you go to school to better yourself, but while you’re in school, you’re at the bottom of the bottom with bad jobs, [you have] no benefits and no help to get through.”

- Antonia Paradela, community college student
and video store clerk, age 24

Working youth over the age of seventeen are the forgotten workers of twenty-first century America. Of course, we are all aware of the existence of working youth – they are the workers we see almost every day of our lives. They pour us coffees at the local Starbucks. They serve us meals at Denny’s and Chevy’s, and countless other chain restaurants, local eateries and fastfood outlets. They are the faces that greet us in bars and night clubs, hotels and theme parks, sporting arenas and other tourist locations. They are the cashiers and counterhands, stockboys and security guards at Office Depot and Office Max, at Walmart and Walgreen’s, in Big Box retail, shopping mall chain stores, and sidestreet boutiques.

Despite such visibility, we lack an understanding of who working youth really are. Many think of the typical youth worker as being a fifteen or sixteen-year-old, still living at home, getting his or her first experience in the workforce, earning some extra pocket money, and having no great concern with what we typically view as “adult” workplace issues – wages, benefits, and working conditions. Most of the young workers we see in our daily lives, however, are actually in their late teens and early twenties. These youth are often working to pay rent, cover personal expenses, help out their parents or support their children, all the while trying to

get ahead in the world. These workers – along with their younger high-school-age colleagues – are also among the most marginalized groups of workers in our country, with lower wages, fewer benefits, less job security, lower status jobs and lower rates of unionization than any other age group in the workforce.

When thinking of youth in their late teens and early twenties, many imagine a world neatly divided between youth who are working and not in school (so-called “non-college youth”) and youth who are in school and not working (“college youth”). In actuality, in the years following high school, the majority of youth both work and pursue some kind of formal or non-formal education, whether in GED programs; private technology, arts, or media academies; trade or vocational institutes; or two-year or four-year colleges. In the years after high school, most young students work, whether during school semesters or school holidays; and most young workers either are simultaneously pursuing studies, are in between being enrolled in programs of study, or are planning to return imminently to further study. Failure to recognize this mix of education and work in the lives of post-high-school youth distorts our views of students: we forget the enormous impact that rising tuition costs have had on the lives of young people and ignore the struggles of post-high-school students as they try to combine schooling and employment. Such failure also distorts our views of young workers out of high school – many of whom see themselves as temporary or “stopgap” workers, and are strongly oriented to student identities and education pathways, even if they are not currently enrolled in formal schooling institutions. Indeed, to a large degree, it is their prolonged orientation to and participation in further education that essentially defines workers in their late teens and twenties as “youth” workers (Tannock 2001).¹

¹ It is surprisingly difficult to determine the exact number of youth who combine work and education in the United States, for at least two reasons. First, data is often collected separately for “traditional

Because they are so commonly misunderstood, working youth over the age of seventeen have been almost completely ignored in national social policy and advocacy agendas. Other groups of marginalized workers – women, minorities, immigrants, the elderly – have all been the focus of legislative activity, community and union organizing, media publicity and academic research. Young workers *under the age of eighteen* have been able, periodically, to win public and media attention and concern by virtue of their being seen as minors, dependents, or children. Child labor laws, whatever their effectiveness, offer at least nominal protection to working

students” and “traditional workers”, in line with the dominant college/non-college model. Second, data is often collected synchronically – asking, for example, whether a student is working during the current academic semester or month – and thus fails to capture the increasingly fluid cycling back and forth between work and schooling that characterizes the lives of many contemporary post-high school youth. A rough picture can begin to be sketched out, however, by juxtaposing different data sets:

- ***(1) What proportion of the population we traditionally think of as young students are employed in the labor force?*** In October 2001, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002) reports that 54% of the population aged 16-24 was enrolled in high school or college, and of these, 43% were employed. Employment figures can be further broken down by enrollment status: 37% of high school students were employed, as were 47% of full-time college students and 84.5% of part-time college students. These figures would increase considerably if given a longitudinal dimension: for example, over 80% of youth in the United States now work at some point during their high school career (National Research Council 1998).
- ***(2) What proportion of the population we traditionally think of as young workers participate in educational activities (other than formal, full-time schooling)?*** In 1999, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 2002) reports that 50% of the population aged 16-24 participated in adult education, where adult education is defined as including basic adult ed and ESL courses, apprenticeship programs, part-time college and work-related courses, but excluding continuous pursuit of formal education. NCES and BLS education enrollment data overlap by both including part-time college students; it is also the case that some individuals combine formal full-time schooling with adult education classes. Nevertheless, the NCES and BLS data together suggest extraordinarily high education participation rates among 16-24 year old youth. While the NCES data do not provide employment rates for youth participating in adult ed, it seems reasonable to assume that the majority of these youth are not traditional students (i.e., are not simultaneously enrolled in full-time, formal education). BLS data (2002) show relatively high employment rates for youth not enrolled in either high school or college: **in October 2001, 60% of this group of 16-19 year olds and 76% of this group of 20-24 year olds were working in the labor force.**

The rise of the working student/student worker, as documented by these kinds of statistics, is, it should be noted, a relatively recent phenomenon in American history. In earlier times, youth and young adults in this country were more likely either to work or go to school, but not both. For discussion of the history of youth employment in the United States, and of the factors leading to the rise of the student worker, see Greenberger and Steinberg 1986, and Tannock, forthcoming.

minors from overwork, disruptive scheduling and dangerous working conditions. These laws, moreover, enshrine the principle that the healthy education and development of working minors should take precedence over the needs and interests of their employers. Working youth who are eighteen and older – legally considered to be adults – have enjoyed no such special legislative protection, no extended media or public attention, and no substantial interest groups advocating or organizing on their behalf.

In order to draw attention to and recenter common (mis)representations of working youth, we report here on a study we have been conducting on the work experiences of a group of young students (most between the ages of 18 and 25) who are enrolled at an urban community college in the Bay Area of northern California that we call “Gateway College” (a pseudonym). We focus our discussion on working community college students because we believe that these students are emblematic of post-high-school working youth. By this we mean that working community college students are particularly likely to face challenges in their working lives that all post-high-school working youth confront to a greater or lesser degree. Community college students are more likely to be employed and work for more hours per week than four-year college students (Horn 1998; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). They are also more likely to come from poor and working class family backgrounds, to be people of color, immigrants and children of immigrants; and they are less likely to receive parental financial assistance while going to school than four-year college students (Shaw, Valadez and Rhoads 1999; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Most community college students work, often for long hours; and many have long histories of cycling back and forth between work and study, enrolling in classes, dropping out of school, transferring units, switching between programs and colleges, and re-enrolling in classes once again.

All of the students we spoke with had tales to tell of their workplace difficulties: of having to handle abusive managers and customers; sexual harassment and race discrimination; low pay and no benefits; scheduling and job insecurities; and the stresses of pulling the double shift of paid work and school work. “I know what it’s like to struggle,” one twenty-two year old student told us, as she reflected on years of bouncing around from job to job, all the while trying to pay bills, handle family and personal crises, and continue with her education. In the following pages, we describe some of the dilemmas and difficulties that young working students at Gateway College face. We report the workplace demands and desires of the students we interviewed. And we call on educators, unionists, policy makers, community and youth organizers to address and improve the conditions of working youth.

Some may feel that the best way to help working youth is to help them get a good education. Indeed, most working youth themselves tend to focus on further schooling as the way up and out of unpleasant and difficult working and living situations. We agree that it is imperative to make higher education as accessible, affordable, supportive, relevant, and effective as possible for all students. But we also believe that social policies and programs that address only the needs of young people as students but not as workers are insufficient and short-sighted – for three reasons:

- ***(1) Poor working conditions can act as an obstacle to further education.*** Some youth delay entry into further education because they feel they cannot afford to be students when they are earning wages that are at or only slightly above the legal minimum. Some youth drop out of school because of scheduling or other conflicts caused by their employers. And many youth find it difficult to excel in their classes while simultaneously trying to handle workplace stresses and impositions.
- ***(2) As youth are spending extended periods of time pursuing further education, they are simultaneously spending more of their lives in exploitative low-end, low-wage jobs.*** It now takes the average community college student considerably longer than two years to complete a two-year associate’s degree – most often because he or she is combining and/or alternating

work and study. Working youth may see themselves as and may be “temporary” workers, but such “temporariness” is becoming increasingly prolonged. Even if youth find that their investments in further education eventually pay off in the form of higher paying, more rewarding and stable employment, they may nevertheless spend years of their lives in marginal work settings. In this regard, improving the working conditions of post-high-school youth is not only in the interests of youth, but of other workers toiling in low-end service sector jobs. For the easy access of low-end service employers to a large, cheap and disposable pool of student workers is likely to exert industry-wide downward pressure on wages and working conditions.

- **(3) *While further education can help some youth, it will not help all youth.*** Many youth do not see their educational plans through – they end up dropping out before they complete their degrees or certificates. Others complete their programs in further education, but are still unable to find higher paying, more rewarding and stable employment. There are simply not enough good jobs in our economy to go around: most jobs still require little more than a high school diploma. While working youth may spend years identifying themselves as being students, learners, and temporary workers, some may find themselves ending up in jobs little different to their places of youth employment.

For these reasons and others, we believe that addressing the needs of working youth constitutes one of the most important and unrecognized labor and social justice issues in contemporary U.S. society.

Young Working Students at Gateway College

Gateway College is an urban community college in the Bay Area of northern California. Founded originally as a trade and technical institute, Gateway has for decades been functioning as a comprehensive college. In addition to its general education program, Gateway offers ESL instruction, basic skills training, and a wide variety of vocational courses in fields from cosmetology to carpentry, communications to culinary arts. Gateway’s student body is one-third African American, one-third Asian American, one-sixth Latino and one-sixth white. Students come predominantly from working class, middle to low income families. Some students are on public assistance and CalWorks runs an on-campus training and support program under the restrictions of federal TANF (welfare) legislation. While Gateway does not collect data on the

work status of its students, staff and students say that the vast majority of students work while at Gateway: over four-fifths of the student body are part-time, and full-time students are often likely to be employed as well.²

Like many community colleges, Gateway is notable for the great age range of its students. About a third of the student body is under 25 years old; a third is between 25 and 35; and a third is over 35 years old. In our study, we were interested in the work experiences of young community college students – on students between the ages of 18 and 25. The work experiences of older students are, of course, also important to document and analyze. However, for many of these older, “adult” students, work and education identities, pathways, and issues are distinct from students who see themselves (and are seen) as “youth.”

Who are the young students of Gateway College? The typical young Gateway student is a person of color who grew up in the Bay Area or Central Valley of California. He or she graduated from high school or has obtained a high school equivalency diploma and now attends college as a day student on a part-time basis. While at college, this student is likely to work in one of the region’s numerous low-end service sector jobs. Indeed, this student may well spend considerably more time on the job, *as a worker*, than he or she does at school. More often than not, past and present employment experience have little to do with our student’s current studies or future ambitions. To realize these ambitions, the typical young student at Gateway hopes to complete an AA degree and/or transfer to a four-year college – hopefully, this will happen

² Surveys by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) provide a sense of the scope of community college student employment nationally. In 1994, NCES found that over 90% of the 1989-1990 community college student cohort reported working while being enrolled in college at some point over the previous five years (NCES 1998a). During the single 1992-1993 academic year, 79% of community college students worked; when employed, these students worked for an average of 33.8 hours per week (NCES 1998b). By way of comparison, about 68% of four-year college students worked for an average of 26 hours per week during the same academic year (NCES 1998b).

sooner rather than later, and ideally, transfer will be to a four-year college not too far from home. Transfers and degrees are expected to be tickets to a middle class level of living.

Our typical young student might take some hope if he or she were to see the transfer and completion rates that Gateway College reports publicly, as it is required to do under federal Student-Right-to-Know legislation. The most recent data announce a 25% completion rate and 41% transfer rate for students three years after they first enter Gateway. A closer look at such figures, however, would tell our student a less promising story: the Student-Right-to-Know rates are for *full-time students* only, a group that makes up a minority (29%) of young (aged 19-24) Gateway students. Moreover, the reported transfer rates include students who switch to other community colleges, not just those who have managed to move on to four-year universities.

Other statistics collected by Gateway are likely to be closer to the experience of our typical young student. Only 58% of students ages 19 to 24 complete the courses they enroll in at Gateway. A little more than 30% of students in this age range drop out of Gateway altogether during a semester in which they have registered. Only 57% of students ages 19 to 24 who register at Gateway for the fall semester are likely to still be there for the following spring semester. As our student could probably point out, while some of these devastating statistics have to do with young students not being fully “ready” to commit to their further education, or with problems in the services (or lack thereof) that Gateway College has to offer, many of these statistics have to do quite simply with life and work getting in the way. It is not uncommon for students to go to school for a semester, drop school to work for a semester, come back to school, and so forth; life and work can also impinge on schooling in more unplanned ways. The end result is that many young students at Gateway spend lengthening periods of their lives toiling in the basements of both the local labor market and the state’s public system of higher education.

Our Study

In our study, we focused not on the schooling experiences of young working community college students but on their work experiences. Our goal was to develop a picture of where young community college students work, of the issues they confront in the workplace, and of how work fits in with the rest of their lives, at school and elsewhere. This chapter is based primarily on interviews we conducted with staff, faculty and students at Gateway College during the fall of 2001. Over a period of three months, we interviewed 45 young working students at Gateway. These interviews were open-ended and conversational, and typically ran about an hour. We recruited for our interviews by approaching students around campus, on the main quad, in the cafeteria, student union building and library. Several sympathetic faculty members invited us into their classrooms to introduce our study to their students, and offered extra class credit to students who were willing to talk with us. Overall, the students we interviewed were reflective of the diverse racial and ethnic, as well as the gender make-up (a slight majority of women) of the Gateway student body (see Appendix A for a breakdown of our interview sample by ethnicity and race).

A Throw-Away Workforce

Carter Jones is a twenty-one-year old, African-American, part-time student studying computer programming at Gateway College. In his non-school hours, Carter works as a security guard for a local Big Box retailer – rather, he actually works for a national temporary agency that places him with a regional security company that subcontracts guard work for the retail owner. Carter is happy with the way his Gateway programming classes are going, but his experiences

working as a security guard are another story. Pay checks from the temp agency are routinely wrong, late or missing altogether. Carter's nominal "employer", Capital Security, provides him with only nominal "training." Capital Security regularly understaffs assignments, so that James is forced – contrary to the company's own stated guidelines – to work in dangerous situations without backup. Carter also feels that retail managers, for whom he works indirectly, hold unrealistic and unfair expectations:

Stores expect security guards to do more than they're really told to do.... If they see somebody stealing and all, and they run out of there, they want that security guard to run down there, chase 'em down the block, tackle 'em, arrest 'em, hold 'em.... They expect nothing to come up missing, and if something happens, they look at you like [*Carter makes a disapproving face*]. I mean, all we can do is [say]. 'I seen that person and this is what he looks like,' and just tell somebody.... So they expect a whole lot out of a security guard.... [But] if something happens, they're not going to pay your hospital bill.... To get [health] benefits, you would have to work there for like seven years.

In his first two months as a guard, Carter had two threatening incidents. In one, a suspected shoplifter took a swing at Carter when he asked the individual to come back inside the store. In the other, a man whom Carter had seen slip peaches into his coat pocket responded with verbal threats when approached: "[He said], 'You'd rather lose your life for the white man?' ... 'What if I had a gun right now? What if I just shot you?'" "I saw him in public after that," Carter says of the peach thief. "I was leery, I didn't want to provoke anything. It can be really dangerous."

Young Gateway students work predominantly in the San Francisco Bay Area's low-wage mass of service sector jobs – in food service, retail and wholesale, security, and clerical work (see Appendix B for a breakdown of our interview sample's employment by industry).³ No

³ These findings are comparable to those reported in survey research on community college students. A 1990 study by NCES (1994) found that community college students nationally worked predominantly in clerical jobs (24.3%), service jobs (19.7%) and retail (12.5%). Similarly, a 1998 survey in Washington state found that 24% of community college students in the state worked in retail, 19% worked in education, health and business services, 16% worked in food service, and 6% were in entertainment, tourism and hospitality services (Harding and Harmon 1999).

matter what their particular job title may be, the dominant impression Gateway students convey, when talking about their work experiences, is of the fundamental cheapness of life in the low-end service sector. Student workers are, for the most part, treated by employers as being a disposable or throw-away workforce. Employers tend to commit and invest little in their student employees, whom they see as being basically unskilled, non-essential and easy to replace. Students are typically hired on a contingent and part-time basis, to cover for seasonal increases in business, or to fill in irregular and undesirable shift and work assignments that regular (adult and non-student) workers don't want to have to do. Many young Gateway students are, like Carter Jones, hired explicitly as temp workers.⁴ As temps, these students find themselves set apart in the workplace from a permanent core of older workers through differentials in pay, benefits, promotion opportunities, job security, work status and working conditions. Adding insult and injury, while permanent workers may have access to company-provided safety boots, protective aprons and back braces, temps are often required to supply their own equipment and clothing while at work.

Wages are low (often close to or at the legal minimum) for all young Gateway working students. Benefits are all but unheard of. Raises and promotions are irregular and minimally significant. Like Carter Jones, many students complain that workplace training is inadequate or altogether absent; work equipment is broken, missing or inappropriate; work shifts are regularly understaffed; and work speed-up is an ever-present reality. "We bust our asses for \$6.25 an hour," says one student worker. "I'm a slave to the retail environment," says another. "It's too much work," says a third. "[My manager] acts like I'm a machine or something." One consequence of never-ending employer cost-cutting measures is that many young Gateway

⁴ Nationwide, youth have been found to make up a disproportionate number of the country's temporary workforce (Jorgensen 1999).

workers toil in unsafe working conditions, at risk of injury and accident, as well as robbery and customer violence. Fears such as those articulated by Carter Jones are in no way abstract or arbitrary, as low-wage retail workers are widely reported to be victimized by some of the highest rates of injury and assault of all occupational categories (DeLaurier 2001; National Research Council 1998). The nightmare for community college students and other youth who come into low-end service sector workplaces is that what are supposed to be temporary, meaningless places of employment will end up having permanent, destructive and even fatal impacts on their lives, futures and bodies.

Despite these extensive material limitations of their employment, young Gateway students' workplace complaints, like those of adult service sector workers, center, first and foremost, on the fundamental lack of respect they receive at work.⁵ Working students are yelled at, cussed out, insulted and falsely accused of workplace wrongdoing by managers and employers. Indeed, many feel that their young age puts them at increased exposure to such verbal badgering. Customer abuse, meanwhile, is widely sanctioned by employer "customer-is-always-right" service policies.

Young female student workers, especially, are forced daily to deal with the demeaning consequences of retail and food service employers who routinely and often blatantly exploit their sexuality in order to attract customers and increase sales. One Gateway student describes management attitudes at a deli where she used to work:

They'd say, 'Oh, you're really cute, so that's why we want to make sure you're up front at the counter.' They wanted the girls to wear low cut shirts so that when we leaned over,

⁵ In general, we found that Gateway students' descriptions of their workplace experiences and concerns closely paralleled accounts of low-end service work that have appeared in previous academic and popular reports on this industry sector. For recent examples, see Cheever 2001; Ehrenreich 2001; Klein 1999; Leidner 1993; Reiter 1991; Schlosser 2001; Tannock 2001.

people could, you know [*Motions to her breasts*].... They were really straightforward about it. They thought it attracted customers. They told me and this other woman there, we were only sixteen. This other girl had this really nice belly, so they said, 'Just wear your apron down around your waist, you can show that.'

Managers do not always have to be so explicit to get young women to dress or act “sexy” on the job. Since much service work is structured in such a way that workers earn the bulk of their income from tips rather than base salaries, it becomes economically advantageous for women in the service industry to dress “seductively” and flirt with customers in exchange for tips, as the principal means they have to increase their income.

Working students of color – who comprise the majority of young Gateway working students – find that racism permeates the very core of their workplaces. Students whom we interviewed told us of employers who segregate workers of color in back-end kitchens and stockrooms, while reserving higher paid and higher status front-end jobs for white workers; of managers who refer to their workers as “my little black girls” or “my wet-backs”; and of employers who discipline black employees more harshly than white employees, or who forbid Latino workers from speaking Spanish to one another on the job (even though these same workers are often expected to serve non-English-speaking Latino customers in Spanish). Perhaps one of the most blatantly discriminatory and degrading workplace policies young Gateway workers have to deal with is what has become known as “retail racial profiling” (Knickerbocker 2000). “We had black and Mexican customers,” says a young record store employee, “and she [the manager] would tell us to watch them all the time. She told us that everyone could be a criminal. But if older white people came in, she’d tell us to go help them and she didn’t suspect them of anything.” Other young Gateway workers likewise tell of being put in situations of having to watch and follow customers of their own age, peer and/or racial group as a requirement of their jobs.

While young Gateway workers chafe under such onerous and unjust employer policies, many feel that they do not have the liberty or security they need to challenge their employers directly. Those few young workers who do try to speak out are apt to find themselves labelled as trouble-makers and bad workers. Consider, for example, the story told by a young Gateway restaurant worker who sought to do no more than claim the rest breaks at work to which he was legally entitled:

It was really intense. They never sat us down and told us about breaks or lunches. I guess they assumed we'd take care of ourselves somehow. I usually worked eight hours straight, with no breaks. I could get a glass of water, but there wasn't any structured breaks. After a while, I was thinking it didn't seem too healthy to be working without lunch on an eight-hour shift.... I read into the Industrial Workers Commission, or something, for the regulations on breaks. So I presented that to the management. It wasn't too well taken at first. It was a totally different atmosphere. They were more aware of what I was doing. My job duties changed, not just waiting tables, but other job duties as well. I was singled out cause everyone else was falling in line, they were quiet and in agreement. I was the one sticking out. I got jobs like sweeping outside. I was more expected to be on time, I got less leeway. They'd say I was late, when it was only a few minutes. I don't know if they were afraid of their business practices being called into question.

Indeed, the basic lack of employer accountability or answerability in the low-end service sector workplace constitutes the most critical concern for addressing and improving young students' working situations.

Poor working conditions affect young Gateway College students not just on the job, but in the rest of their lives as well – in particular, as we explore in the following section, in students' lives at school. When outside observers see the difficulties that young community college students get into because of their working lives, they sometimes ask why these students don't just do a better job of managing and keeping their work lives under control. Why don't they just find jobs that don't interfere with school? Why don't they prioritize school over work? Why don't they just tell management ahead of time when they can work and when they cannot

work? What our Gateway interviews overwhelmingly suggest is that such questions betray a basic lack of understanding of the pressures, pitfalls and problems that young community college students typically confront on the job. No matter how careful a student may be in selecting a school-term job, all too often he or she will later find out the hard way that his or her employers' initial promises and guarantees are little more than empty rhetoric – and that what he or she can do, as an individual worker, in the way of effective response, is highly limited. Simply knowing one's rights and interests in the low-end service sector workplace is not enough to safeguard those rights and interests.

The Double Shift of Paid Work and School Work

The first time Angela Alvarez enrolled in Gateway College, she ended up dropping out. Angela had found a job as a part-time bank teller to help pay her way through school. But her “part-time” job ended up taking up between forty and forty-five hours per week. School started to fall by the wayside:

I missed one class, then two. Then I was missing class two times a week. They [the management] said they supported my education, but they didn't. They said, 'Please, we need you to stay, please stay!' Customers would get upset when you were balancing and not taking customers. They'd yell from the line, 'Get more tellers out here!' The manager would beg you to stay. I always stayed when they told me.... Then, forget about it! I was late and didn't make it to class. I was supposed to leave at 5:30 pm. The few times I did leave at that time, I got attitude.

The branch in which Angela worked was chronically and deliberately understaffed by her employer.⁶ Angela, consequently, was regularly being asked to work a little extra when it was

⁶ Service sector employers are not unaware of the need for higher staffing levels; it is simply more profitable for them to keep staffing levels low. Angela described to us how part of her teller school training was explicitly devoted to lessons of how to handle customer complaints brought about by

busy. She started to get sick from the stress and exhaustion of trying to balance work and school. Not only was she missing classes, but her work schedule didn't allow her time to study. Angela eventually quit her bank job – but not before dropping out of college. Currently re-enrolled in Gateway and living at home with her mom, Angela harbors great bitterness toward her former employer. She refuses to carry her personal account with the bank, and swears that she will never again work in the banking and finance industry. Her dream is to transfer to a four-year college and one day become a human rights lawyer.

Most young Gateway students regularly pull a “double shift” of school work and paid work. They go to school in order to move up out of the low-wage, low-status service jobs that they find themselves stuck in as youth without a college degree. They go to work – in these same low-wage jobs – in order to support themselves while going through school. The resulting time crunch, particularly for those students who are attempting to combine full-time schooling *and* full-time employment (and thereby accelerate their progress through community college and beyond), can be staggering. College life for young Gateway students is decidedly *not* a life of leisure:

It's tough [balancing everything]. Cause I'd go to school from 8 to, like, 3, and then I'd work from 4 ... to 10 or 11 almost every other night. I was, like, aw man, I ain't doin' no homework. I got to wake up at 6:30 to get to school.... I'd come home, try to do a little bit of homework, then just go to sleep, wake up and do the same thing.... I'd come in extra cause I needed the money. I didn't have much choice, I needed gas to get to school. I didn't want to bug my mom for it, cause she was trying to take care of my two brothers and my sister.

- *Twenty-two-year-old Gateway College student and bakery assistant*

I work forty hours a week, full time.... My schedule is really, really tight. I have no time to do anything. I have school Monday through Thursday. Monday and Tuesday I have school from 8 to 5:30. On Tuesday, I go to work from 6 to 10:30. Wednesday and Thursday, I go to

understaffing: “At teller school, they said never get in cahoots with a customer about [the bank]. If a customer said, ‘You guys are so understaffed, why don't you hire new people?’, you say, ‘We're hiring, would you be interested in applying for a position?’ They told us to say that!”

work from 2 to 10:30. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, [I work from] 9 to 5. That's what I do over and over again, that's my schedule for the whole week. I'm doing pretty fine with it, ... I just have no social time to do anything.... That's my life, work and school, that's it.... If it weren't for that job, I don't think I'd be able to come to school, cause I wouldn't have any money to pay tuition, my books, my bills and stuff like that.

- Twenty-year-old Gateway College student and tire installer

Some Gateway students are extraordinarily successful at pulling their double shift of schooling and employment: they complete their coursework on time, keep their grades up and move steadily through their college requirements. Many others find the going more difficult. Their grades decline, they stop going to class, they drop a class or two, or – like Angela – they drop out of college altogether.⁷ They end up, in other words, looking for ways to cut their losses and ease their burdens. What most students find, however, regardless of official academic measures of their relative “success” or “failure”, is that the double shift of school work and paid work leads almost invariably to increased levels of stress, deteriorated states of health, and an overall loss of sleep, study, family, personal, social and community time.

Pulling a double shift of work and school is difficult even in the best of circumstances. College environments, family situations, friendship networks, and individual personality, academic ability and motivation can all strongly affect a young student's ability to successfully handle the work-school one-two punch. What is too often overlooked, however, in research and policy discussions of college student workers is that conditions within students' workplaces (notably wages and benefits, stress levels, and scheduling practices), which are under the control

⁷ Horn (1998), analyzing data from the 1996 National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study, found that 40% of working community college students reported that work limited their class choices at college, and 37% reported that work had a negative effect on their academic performance.

of students' managers and employers, also have a pivotal impact on student success in pulling the double work-school shift.⁸

One of the first demands of all the young Gateway workers we spoke with, in terms of how best to improve their working conditions, was for higher levels of pay. Gateway students plead for higher wages because they feel that the work they perform is undervalued and undercompensated; but also because they know that the higher their wages, the less hours they would have to work to put themselves through school, and the easier it would be to combine schooling and employment. The story is the same with benefits. Few Gateway students receive health or any other form of benefit from their employers. Gateway students feel that such a situation is unacceptable both because it is unjust, but also because the lack of health benefits means that they have to work extra long hours to cover what are often exorbitant health care costs in times of illness.

Working students ideally prefer jobs that are either related to fields they are studying, or, if no such jobs are available, jobs that at least do not sap their mental energy or emotional spirits or obstruct in any other way their ability to focus on their schoolwork. Unfortunately, as we described in the previous section, the jobs that are commonly available to young community college students are widely characterized by poor, stressful and often abusive working conditions. High workplace stress levels take a direct toll on working students' ability to perform academically. They also tend to generate workplace cultures in which drug and alcohol

⁸ The research literature on college student workers is limited and, in terms of policy considerations, is often focused narrowly on the question of how many hours per week students can work before work starts to interfere with their academic performance (as with high school student workers, the cut-off point seems to be about 15-20 hours per week). As an education-based literature, this research rarely if ever engages seriously with the question of pushing for needed workplace reform. And as a quantitative and survey-based literature, this research is generally unable and uninterested in examining closely workplace conditions and experiences so as to develop broader understandings of the nature of students'

use is widespread. “It seems like we all drink a lot,” a Gateway student and part-time waitress says of her fellow restaurant employees: “Maybe because the job sucks.” “It’s a fast-paced restaurant,” says another young working student. “You’re running the whole time. It’s just stressful. The restaurant industry is notorious for being stressful, and this place is particularly stressful. I was overwhelmed at first. It takes at least a cocktail, sometimes two, to unwind after work. I get home at one a.m. after work, and I’m still going. It takes a toll on my body and my short-term memory.” Workplace cultures in which drug and alcohol use and abuse are rampant, needless to say, are hardly supportive of schooling success.

It is employer scheduling practices, however, that constitute the most direct and immediate threat to students’ abilities to successfully combine work and school. As the story told by Angela Alvarez above suggests, employer pressure on student employees to work more than they would prefer leads to missed classes, lost studying time, declining grades, and incomplete coursework. Work schedules in the low-end service sector are notoriously unstable, unpredictable and irregular (Leidner 1993; Tannock 2001). Employers typically don’t post schedules until a couple of days ahead of time, and further reserve the right to make last minute schedule alterations. As a consequence, students find it hard to plan the rest of their lives around their work. Many students are inclined to pick up extra hours of work whenever they become available, because there is no guarantee of minimum numbers of work hours from day to day, or week to week – and school, transportation, rent and food budgets have to be met. Most students seek to increase scheduling stability through restricting their work availability. But it is nevertheless quite common for managers to schedule workers outside of their stated availability,

working lives. See, for example, Haigh 1991; Harding and Harmon 1999; Horn 1998; National Center for Education Statistics 1998; Pascarella et al. 1998.

and subsequently hold workers accountable for either working these shifts or finding replacements.

Low-end service employers practice what some have called “just-in-time” scheduling (Tannock 2001). Rather than hire full-time workers – for whom there are legal and/or social expectations to provide a minimum and constant number of work hours, as well as health and other work benefits – employers hire cheap and dispensable part-time workers, and then push these workers to work full-time hours if and when their businesses require extra staffing. Similarly, instead of scheduling workers for full-length work shifts, employers schedule workers for short shifts and then press workers to work unscheduled overtime as needed. The experience of 19 year old Jennifer Nguyen, a Gateway student and part-time worker at The Gap is typical:

I’ve worked at The Gap for a year.... We always have to stay after [our shifts are over] to replenish the items and clean up.... They only schedule you for two or three hours, that’s how they schedule people.... One time they put me on for a two hour shift. Later on, they ask me, ‘Oh, can you stay for another two hours?’ You have to say yes, or if you say no, they’ll be like, ‘Well, ok, fine’.

As a direct result of such practices, Gateway students constantly find themselves expected by their employers to stay late and work extra hours beyond their regularly scheduled shifts. While employers may tell students that they support their education, when push comes to shove, most employers favor the needs of their businesses above all else. When students try to leave their work on time – to go to class, or get home to study, sleep or see their families – they find they are met with immense pressures from their employers, from harried co-workers and from impatient customers to stay on and help out.

Problems with work scheduling for Gateway College students feed back into problems with wage and workplace stress levels. Students have a hard time finding employers who are willing and able to be flexible and respectful work schedulers. “There’s not a lot of options out

there,” as one student told us. “You can’t go to a boss and say I have to change my schedule every semester. There aren’t a lot of places that are going to hire someone like that. School should come first, but it seems like society and companies don’t understand that. They make it really hard to go to school. It’s hard for students to get jobs in the first place.” When students do find employers who are flexible and responsible schedulers, they are reluctant to protest too strongly over other issues such as low wage levels, lack of benefits or poor working conditions.

Some students find themselves in a Catch-22 when employers link pay raises to their willingness to work unscheduled overtime – indeed, this is one of Jennifer Nguyen’s biggest complaints about her job at The Gap. On the one hand, students desperately want to earn higher wages to support their schooling; but on the other, they know they have to protect their time vigorously so that their investments in college will not be wasted. “It’s not fair,” Jennifer says: “Some people like myself have school, ... and I don’t have time to work extra hours.... My friend doesn’t go to school, so he was always available to work, so they loved him. It wasn’t based on what you did on the job. Some people don’t do their jobs at all, but they get paid more because they work extra hours.”

Student employers can also directly endanger Gateway students’ ability to successfully pull off a double shift of paid work and school work through a general lack of honesty, integrity and accountability. As in Angela Alvarez’s story, when employers hire students, they often make false and inaccurate promises about the hours and schedules they expect students to work. Many employers are disingenuous in pressuring young students to work extra hours by telling them how important and special they are to their businesses:

At The House of Bagels, I worked for Charley.... He wanted to create a family business environment.... He was cool, but he didn’t pay us that much.... We got morally involved in the business. Even though he got the money and we didn’t, we felt really involved and

loyal. That happens a lot to youth workers, they feel like they can't leave, like who would replace them? It's the one place where you feel valuable, especially if you don't feel that way at home or school. You feel needed, you don't want to leave.

Not only do employers seek to secure the short-term consent and cooperation of their young employees through sweet talk and soft praise, but even more alarmingly, through dubious promises of opportunities for upward mobility for those young workers who are willing to work extra hard, put in extra time, and sacrifice all else for the needs of their employers. Whether working as bank tellers, warehouse stockers, retail clerks or restaurant waitstaff, young Gateway students all tell stories of their employers regaling them with visions of rising rapidly through internal corporate hierarchies. What is so abhorrent about such rhetoric is that in most of the occupations in which young Gateway students work, career ladders leading out of entry-level positions are radically truncated, limited in scope or altogether non-existent. To the degree that young working students buy into their employers' rhetoric, they are apt to sacrifice their school work, jeopardizing whatever minimal chance they may have once had at real and meaningful upward social mobility.

Dilemmas of Addressing the Working Needs of Community College Students

When you ask young working Gateway College students about their occupational ambitions, they will usually tell you that they hope one day to become lawyers, doctors, teachers, professors, nurses, social workers, small business owners, contractors, media producers, journalists, computer specialists, and so forth. They dream, in other words, of middle-class life styles and professional or entrepreneurial work identities. "I don't want to get stuck at a place like Trader Joes," one typical student told us. "I want more. I want a professional life. I want a degree that looks pretty on my wall. I can see myself in an office, having certain advantages."

Dreams of upward social mobility are what drive young community college students to put up with crappy jobs, to pull the double shift of paid work and school work, and to struggle through with what can sometimes seem a never-ending series of college general education requirements.

Paradoxically, dreams of upward mobility and general “looking-to-the-future” orientations among young community college students are also one of the key factors that make it so difficult to help these young students address the immediate labor market and workplace problems that all too often stand in the way of students’ academic and occupational success. Since students tend to see the solution to their current work difficulties as coming through the pursuit of more education, they do not typically focus on how they can improve their current jobs, but instead work on strategies that they hope and expect will enable them to quickly leave these jobs behind. “Working at the video store is just passing time to me,” a Gateway student tells us: “I have aspirations and dreams.” While many young working Gateway students take great pride in the work they do in their paid jobs, they clearly identify themselves as being students, and not as being restaurant, retail, or warehouse workers – this, despite the fact that many of them spend a far greater proportion of their waking lives at work than they do at school.

Working community college students adopt strong student identities in part, of course, because of the status that being a student confers. Identifying as a student rather than as a low-end service sector worker allows a young person to endure the many indignities of low-wage work. Responding to an experience of being unfairly disciplined at a warehouse job, a Gateway College student consoled himself with these thoughts: “I’m still young, I’ve got my whole life ahead of me. I don’t need this! I won’t be working a warehouse job my entire life, making these low wages.” Unfortunately, the embrace of a student identity can not only lead to workplace passivity, but can further undermine worker solidarity (and, consequently, the potential for

collective worker action), as working students come to see themselves as being superior to non-students on the job. “I was a step above the rest,” a Gateway student condescendingly says of her restaurant co-workers during a previous school semester, “I was college-bound, I was self-motivated.”

A second, related set of dilemmas confronting those who would wish to improve youth work conditions arise from the fact that many young community college students, to a certain degree, accept and even enjoy their low-end service sector jobs. Work in the low-end service sector has become such a normative experience for youth in the United States, that many young people simply accept such work as “what one does when one is young” (Tannock 2001). As far as most young people can see, nobody else in our society – whether political leaders, labor, community or social justice groups – seems to be losing much sleep over the workplace trials and tribulations of post-high-school working students. Some young workers accept their low-end jobs because they believe that the reward for doing so now will be the opportunity for more meaningful and well-compensated forms of employment at some unspecified point in the future.

Working with deferred dreams of meaningful employment, many young workers invest themselves in the social worlds and small pleasures and opportunities such as are available in their restaurant, retail and service jobs. Work is a place, after all, that young people can feel needed and important; workplace socializing can become a primary focus of entertainment, energy and intrigue; and taking home cash on a daily basis, as one young waitress put it to us, can be “intoxicating.” Workers in trendy clothing stores sometimes overlook their skimpy wages and lack of benefits as they get excited about employer-provided clothing discounts – the line between consumer and worker for many young students is somewhat fuzzy, as they apply for jobs in places they like to shop, and shop in places they work. Workers in restaurants and food

stores, likewise, stock up on left-overs, employer-discounted meals and pilfered snacks. Even exploitative workplace relations can be experienced as something else by some young workers. “It was a trophy life.... I felt glamorous,” says a young Gateway student and former cocktail waitress of a restaurant in which her employer constantly pushed female staff to “wear something short and tight.” “I was only 18,” she adds, by way of explanation: “So I was ok with it, I didn’t think about it.”

Recognizing that young community college workers sometimes accept and enjoy their low-end service sector jobs does not mean that these young workers are uncritical of their employers. Young Gateway students are quick to complain of the poverty of their working conditions. Acceptance and pleasure, however, do help explain why young working students are not more active in protesting the conditions of their employment. High rates of turnover, tight and precarious student budgets, and a simple lack of free time further combine with working students’ education-based and future-oriented identities, ideologies and values to make the post-high-school youth population a difficult segment of the labor market to organize.⁹

Conditions internal to community colleges constitute a different and third set of dilemmas for addressing the working needs of community college students. Community colleges such as Gateway tend to be severely under-funded and under-resourced institutions that can barely meet the tasks with which they are currently charged, let alone take on new responsibilities such as helping their students deal with contemporaneous workplace and employment difficulties.

⁹ We focus here on age and life-stage-specific characteristics that make post-high school working youth a difficult population to organize. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this article noted that fear is a major obstacle to organizing young workers, as it is for other categories of workers as well. While we agree with this general point, we would also point out that surveys conducted by unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) consistently find that their younger members are more supportive – in survey responses, at least – of strike actions. These findings are typically explained by arguing that young, temporary workers have less attachment to their current jobs than career workers,

Moreover, as explicitly vocational institutions operating in an unregulated U.S. labor market, most community colleges struggle to develop and maintain strong and cordial relations with local employers so as to help guarantee future job placements for the students whom they are educating and training. As such, community college administrators are apt to shy away from confronting employers over the poor working conditions to which their students are currently being subjected.

Ideological bias and prejudice present further potential obstacles to developing worker-empowerment programs for young students within the community college. As Grubb, Worthen, Byrd and Webb (1999) point out in seeking to explain why there is so little attention paid to labor concerns within community college vocational classrooms, many vocational educators in the community college are themselves former business owners, managers and contractors, and tend to see the world through management rather than worker eyes. In our interviews with faculty and staff at Gateway College, we also found that community college instructors, like their students, tend, not surprisingly, to be education-focused and future-oriented. Instructors clearly see the solution to students' current employment difficulties as being the pursuit of further education. They feel their task is one of helping students – indirectly and abstractly, through the provision of a quality education – move up and out of their current places of employment. Many have a much harder time engaging with the idea of doing anything directly to help their students transform their actual, real-life and immediate working conditions – even though they may well recognize that these conditions are strongly affecting the performance of students within their own classrooms.¹⁰

and consequently, less to lose by threatening to go out on the picket line. See Tannock 2001 for further discussion of this line of argument.

¹⁰ The irony here, of course, is that, while labor concerns rarely receive serious attention in community college classrooms, many community college instructors (especially in the Bay Area of California) are

Finally, we found in our Gateway College interviews that some instructors and staff – although certainly not all – held what we felt were prejudiced views of youth mirroring those found in youth workplaces and elsewhere throughout our adult-dominated society. Some instructors and staff commented to us that older, adult community college students were “serious” students and workers with whom they could fully engage and support. Younger community college students, they complained, were often “not serious,” not committed, and – in striking contradiction to what we found in all our student interviews – not really all that hard workers. It is sadly all too often the case that post-high-school youth in this country experience a lack of appreciation and support not just in their low-end, low-wage workplaces, but also in those institutions of higher education that are supposedly in existence explicitly to help them succeed and get ahead in their dreams and aspirations.

What Options Are There?

Most reports on youth employment difficulties in North America conclude in the same way. They propose to address these difficulties by calling for an array of education-based solutions: more education; better education; more accessible education; earlier access to childhood education for youth from “at-risk” backgrounds; better school-to-work pathways; expanded and improved career training and development ladders; more investment in youth job-training programs. Some reports make a gesture toward recognizing the need or desirability for more far-reaching, “radical” solutions that would address basic “structural” inequities, dislocations and contradictions in contemporary society and economy. But they typically view

themselves union members who benefit from collective labor action that has improved their own conditions of employment. This same scenario, it might be noted, plays out at the K-12 level of schooling

such solutions with deep resignation, arguing that these are unlikely to be “feasible” or “practical,” given current political climates.¹¹

We believe that education-based solutions to the workplace and labor market needs of post-high-school working youth, while critically important, are, in and of themselves, insufficient and even short-sighted. Many post-high school working youth, after all, are *already* pursuing the option of more and better education opportunities – whether in community college or elsewhere. Current political climates are, indeed, difficult: it is unlikely that political leaders, college administrators, or employers will independently take the initiative to address and improve youth working conditions in any significant or meaningful way. Hard as it may be, real solutions to youth workplace difficulties, therefore, will inevitably have to involve collective, grassroots organizing – organizing that responds to and builds upon the needs, demands and criticisms that working youth themselves are already able to articulate, at least in part. In this final section, we highlight four relevant organizing arenas: labor organizing; youth and student organizing; free and reduced tuition campaigns; and political organizing. Post-high-school youth are, as we have acknowledged, a difficult group to organize. Effective campaigns, consequently, will no doubt have to be patient, innovative and adaptable, and will likely need to involve all three types of organizing:

- **(1) Labor Organizing.** A majority of working students we interviewed at Gateway College believed that a union would be useful to them personally at work. Many students had friends or family members who belonged to unions, and they saw “union jobs” as being “good jobs.” Unions, of course, offer basic protections in the workplace that benefit all workers, young and old – grievance procedures, job security, higher wages and benefits, and collective labor action. Unions also offer tools and resources that could be useful in tackling issues of particular concern to working youth (e.g., scheduling security, tuition assistance, age discrimination). Labor organizing among post-high-school working youth faces two

as well.

¹¹ See, for example, Barling & Kelloway 1999; *The Forgotten Half* 1988; Marquardt 1998; Newman 1999.

principal challenges. First, traditional union organizing, election and contract campaigns are difficult to carry out with a youth-dominated workforce – in large part, because of high job turnover rates. Second, unions tend to be adult-dominated, seniority-based institutions that often overlook the interests and needs of their younger members (Tannock 2001). Many union leaders will need to be pushed – by youth and community groups, perhaps – to look beyond their older, adult core membership in order to agitate on behalf of workers of all ages and life-stages.

- **(2) *Youth and Student Organizing.*** In the past decade, youth and student organizing in the United States have resurfaced as exciting and potent political forces. Nationwide, a student anti-sweatshop movement has pushed universities to sign “codes of conduct” regulating minimum labor standards for subcontracted producers of campus clothing. Students should be encouraged to apply their energies as well to issues directly affecting youth and student workers – possibly even through developing codes of conduct that youth employers could be pressured into endorsing. In California, a strong youth movement (involving mostly high-school-aged youth) has developed in opposition to an increasingly repressive juvenile justice system, and to repeated political attacks on immigrant rights, minority welfare and bilingual education. In the name of social, racial and economic justice, youth groups have shown themselves to be highly resourceful in putting public pressure on elected officials, school administrations and corporate sponsors of regressive policy initiatives. They, too, should be encouraged (perhaps with the assistance of labor unions) into bringing similar tactics to bear on youth employers with the goal of substantially improving impoverished youth work conditions. Organizing of on-campus student workers has, actually, grown enormously over the last decade at the graduate level, and in the spring of 2002, resident assistants at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, became the country’s first group of undergraduate student workers to vote to unionize. Hopefully, the example of graduate student organizing will continue to spread throughout the population of undergraduates who work, not only on campus but off campus as well.
- **(3) *Free and Reduced Tuition Campaigns:*** Campus-based organizing can also help the situation of working youth by tackling the problem of runaway tuition costs. For decades, college tuitions have been rising sharply and levels of student indebtedness have been rising even faster (Males 1999). While community college tuition is still extraordinarily cheap compared with the cost of four-year colleges, rates of student bankruptcy are actually equivalent among two-year and four-year college students, in large part due to the considerably lower earning levels that community college attendance brings, as well as the fact that community college students are much less likely than four-year college students to receive parental financial assistance while in school (Fossey and Bateman 1998; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Post high-school youth work either to help put themselves through college or because they feel they cannot afford to go to college: the less students have to pay for college, the less they have to work, and the freer they are in choosing types of employment both during and after college. There was a time in this country when free access to public higher education was considered a right – the University of California, for example, did not charge students tuition until the early 1960s. Worldwide, students are organizing, striking and even occupying campuses in a fight to save free and low-cost, state-subsidized higher education: this is a battle that can directly assist the needs and interests of working

youth.

- **(4) Political Organizing.** Finally, political organizing directed at transforming public policy – and labor legislation, in particular – is essential for any hope of substantially improving the lives of all working youths, as well as other low-end, low-wage workers. Raising the minimum wage to a “living wage” and pegging increases in the minimum wage to annual increases in the cost of living (and even, in the case of working students, to increases in tuition costs) would obviously be a boon to working youth. Political organizing should also focus on reforming and improving occupational health and safety legislation and enforcement; on creating a national system of universal health care; on developing effective and fair policy regarding the employment of temporary workers; and on redesigning labor relations law so as to make it easier for young and other “non-traditional” workers to organize themselves collectively.

Organizing, of course, is not antithetical to education: ideally, the two should be integrally linked. We conclude, therefore, with a general call to develop reinvigorated forms of labor education in our schools, colleges, communities and workplaces that can help youth learn how to transform the conditions of their work and school lives – a labor education founded upon what working-class activists in another era used to call “really useful knowledge” (Johnson 1979). Labor studies curricula that are directly tied to actual youth school and work experiences should become a pivotal component of both secondary and post-secondary education. Youth need to know their rights at work as well as to understand how working people have historically had to take action in order to improve their working situations; they also need to be made aware of the social mobility restrictions, dilemmas and paradoxes caused by the “education-jobs gap” in this country (Livingstone 1999). Most fundamentally, however, youth need to know how to take action themselves as they find their workplace rights and self-respect routinely trampled upon by their employers. They need to know, in other words, how to make their *own* labor histories through engaging with co-workers and fellow students, educators, family members and labor and community organizers so to alter to their greater benefit the basic terms and conditions of their own working and learning futures.

**Appendix A:
Ethnicity and Gender of Student Sample from Gateway College**

	African-American	Latino/a	White	Asian-American	Other	Total	Percent by Gender
Female	8	7	6	2	1	24	53%
Male	10	4	4	2	1	21	47%
Total	18	11	10	4	2	45	100%
Percent by Ethnicity	40%	24.5%	22%	9%	4.5%	100%	

**Appendix B:
Employment By Industry of Student Sample from Gateway College**

Retail	26	34%
Food Service	25	33%
Clerical	11	14.5%
Wholesale	7	9%
Security (Business Service)	6	8%
Public Sector	1	1.5%
TOTAL	76	100%

NOTE: Numbers add up to more than 45 since many of our interviewees had worked or were currently working in more than one industry while enrolled at Gateway.

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