

Research on Practical Pathways of Strengthening Labor Education for College and University Students in the New Era

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Abstract: Labor education is an essential component of college and university education that can help students to develop a strong work ethic, acquire practical skills, and better understand the value of work. Strengthening labor education for college and university students is an urgent need of the high-quality development of the society and the internal requirement of promoting the all-round development of individuals. This study analyzes the importance of strengthening labor education for college and university students in the new era and proposes four practical pathways which draw on labor courses and campus activities, social practices, scientific research projects, and internships. After implementing these pathways, a survey of 967 students showed that students' understanding and awareness of labor was deepened, their hands-on skills and interests in science and labor practices were improved, and they became more cordially respectful to the working class. Taken together, the exploration and practice of these pathways helps college and university students to recognize their abilities, strengths, and interests, and guides them to form good labor habits that permeate all aspects of their studies and lives.

Keywords: Labor education; College and university students; Strengthening pathways; Practice and effect

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1. Introduction

Human beings create material and spiritual wealth through labor. Even with the emergence of the internet and artificial intelligence, labor as a basic way of human survival has not been changed. College and university students represent a potential force that drives social progress and national development. Labor education for college and university students is the process of imparting knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable students to understand the value of work and develop a strong work ethic. It aims to promote the formation of correct labor values and cultivate labor literacy among college and university students through various educational practices.

However, in a certain period, labor education has been marginalized to some extent. Some colleges and universities focus only on imparting knowledge to students but neglect the cultivation of their labor awareness and skills. This results in some college and university students not knowing how to work, not willing to work hard, and even not cherishing the fruits of labor^[1]. To rectify their attitude towards labor, to cultivate their labor awareness and skills, and to foster their willpower, labor education for college and university students needs be strengthened using multiple pathways.

More importantly, high-quality development of the society in the new era calls for more talents with a hardworking attitude and the spirit of dedication. To meet the requirement, national policies in China encourage college and university students to actively step out of the campus, immerse in grassroots communities, and engage in practical activities. In this paper, we present practical pathways of strengthening labor education for college and university students and analyze the effect of these pathways through a survey, aiming to provide a sound guideline for future studies in this area.

2. Importance of strengthening labor education for college and university students in the new era

Nowadays, educational systems emphasize mainly on grades, with labor education taking a backseat. As a result, some college and university students have only focused on studying and been out of touch with labor practices for a long time. Their understanding of labor and the society is poor. Some have even developed a lazy mindset and hold an erroneous attitude of “wishing to gain without working hard”^[2]. This reflects the neglect of awareness of the impact and benefits of labor education on students’ overall development and the urgent need to strengthen labor education for college and university students in the new era.

2.1. Cultivating college and university students with all-round development

Higher education shoulders the important task of cultivating college and university students with all-round development of morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor skills^[3]. Through labor practices, college and university students can verify and deepen their understanding of the knowledge they have learned in classes, broaden their vision, as well as find the best balance in terms of social needs and personal value realization.

Labor education is not only a theoretical education in the classroom, but also practices in the fields. A renowned Chinese educator in the modern time, Tao Xingzhi, once remarked that “action is the beginning of knowledge,” which emphasized that one can obtain true knowledge through actual labor and practical activities^[4]. In an internet society with powerful artificial intelligence and rapid technological advancements, some students hold the view that labor is associated with low-skilled, manual work, which undervalues the significance of labor education. In fact, it has been proved many times that new developments and innovations are derived from labor in the laboratories and in the fields. By putting in a lot of time and energy and making little progress, scientists develop or improve technologies, which in turn saves a lot of labor. Instead of negating the value of labor, college and university students ought to actively engage in labor practices to cultivate resilience and strong psychological qualities. In addition, labor education can promote students’ ability to endure hardships through self-reliance, self-improvement, and self-challenge^[5].

Therefore, the unique function of labor education in nurturing individuals serves as a strong foundation for the development of moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic qualities.

2.2. Creating a sound foundation for future work experiences

College and university students are the future labor force for the high-quality development of the country. Due to the misleading of unhealthy societal trends, college and university students' understanding and awareness of labor is weak. For example, when faced with social practice and internship opportunities provided by the school and the society, some college and university students tend to be passive and exhibit a negative attitude, represented by low attendance and a tendency to slack off.

However, apart from their professional knowledge and skills, businesses in the society also require employees to be hard-working, diligent, and willing to devote themselves to work. There are several surveys showing that the core standards for outstanding employees in world-renowned companies include dedication, loyalty, team spirit, proactive work attitude, attention to detail, and pursuit of perfection. To improve college and university students' competence and better prepare them for the requirements of future work experiences, efforts need to be given to cultivate their labor attitude, habits, skills, and work ethics before they enter the real world.

3. Practical pathways to strengthen labor education for college and university students in the new era

Labor education cannot be simplistically equated with mere physical labor. Instead, it is a purposeful, planned, and organized educational activity ^[6]. Strengthening labor education for college and university students requires the cooperation and coordination of students, counselors, teachers, and policy makers on campus and in the society.

3.1. Setting up labor-related courses and campus activities to increase students' labor awareness

Some college and university students tend to not respect or honor hard work, thinking that it is related to farmers and factory workers. To cultivate correct labor concepts and labor awareness among students, it is necessary to establish a curriculum system for labor education in colleges and universities. Courses can be set up such as labor law, human resource management, labor and social security, social work, and occupational safety engineering. In these courses, labor conventions, daily labor routines, and labor task lists are developed to promote a culture of labor and foster a sense of pride in labor. Simulation scenarios based on real-life situations are created to help students to learn to cooperate with each other, and model workers in the society are invited to share their stories so as to improve students' labor awareness and enthusiasm for work. Moreover, labor courses should be considered as an important part in student evaluations to help them to develop comprehensively in morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor skills.

In addition, students are required to participate in a one-week labor practice every semester to cultivate their hardworking mindset. Interest groups and clubs can be established to organize various labor-themed educational activities in conjunction with Tree Planting Day, Lei Feng Memorial Day, and International Workers' Day. For example, students are encouraged to work as teaching assistant or laboratory assistant and engage in agricultural production, making handicrafts, operating industrial machines, and experiencing new technology. At the end of the semester, students are allowed to share their experiences and gains, and think about the connection between labor, individual growth, as well as social progress. The outcome of students' labor activities is then exhibited on campus and the deeds of exemplary labor models are widely publicized using publicity columns and new media. Moreover, a summary report is handed in by students and jointly assessed by members of the class, counselors, and teachers based on their labor attitude and awareness. Specific

feedback on the assessment is provided to students in a timely manner to promote good exchanges of ideas. Lastly, all these materials are documented to accumulate data for future improvement.

3.2. Conducting social practices to familiarize students with actual labor practices

Society is like a melting pot, encompassing not only joy and happiness but also hardships and sorrow. Only by familiarizing oneself with the society in advance can one develop “immunity” to difficulties and confidently face various challenges in the society. Colleges and universities are a preliminary stage for students to become full-fledged members of the society. Social practices can provide students with great opportunities to acquaint themselves with the society, serving as a bridge between campus and the society.

Apart from setting up labor-related courses, conducting social practices can allow students to experience real-life service tasks and actual labor practices. Social practices of different themes can be organized to train students in various ways and cultivate their labor awareness. For example, to help in fighting against infectious diseases, students can form a medical team that focuses on epidemic disease prevention and control, emergency aid training, and popularization of basic medical knowledge. In relation to environmental pollution, students can conduct campaigns, social surveys, and science talks to raise the awareness of the public in water resource protection and waste classification. To provide love and care for the children whose parents have left home to work in the cities, voluntary service groups are formed to tutor these kids and provide mental health support. Moreover, students can help to solve the practical problems encountered by farmers in their agricultural production, such as the use of drones for spraying pesticides instead of manual spraying to prevent poisoning incidents.

In addition, college and university students can engage in rural public services, such as disinfecting public facilities and beautifying the rural environment during summer and winter vacations. By using the knowledge that they have learned to serve at the grassroots level, students’ social experiences are enriched, and the spirit of hardworking and dedication can be cultivated to make students understand that a good young person in the new era is someone who is willing to work hard and endure hardships.

3.3. Sponsoring scientific research projects to increase students’ interests in science and their competitiveness in the society

With the rapid advancement of science and technology, it is far from sufficient for college and university students to only master the basic knowledge in the textbooks. A good command of the latest developments and cutting-edge technologies in corresponding disciplines is also required. Scientific research projects are creative activities that can enable students to apply existing scientific knowledge to solve practical problems in social production and daily life, enhance their interest in learning and science, and even develop new technologies.

Scientific research projects for college and university students involve more than just conducting experiments. Being guided by interests, students form teams as well as select research topic, and through literature review they find the scientific problems for investigation. Subsequently, they make concrete research plans, discuss the value of the research with mentors, and apply for funding support. In the process of research implementation, students independently conduct surveys and experiments, analyze the data, and cooperate to solve the problems encountered. In doing so, they can deepen their understanding of the theoretical knowledge, recognize their shortcomings and weaknesses in learning, and thereby improve the organization, arrangement, and interrelation of knowledge within their minds. During the summary phase, students’ scientific writing skills and communication skills are improved by writing reports or research papers through accurate descriptions of results, clear logical reasoning, and language polishing. Besides, their self-expression abilities are augmented during the introduction of the research significance and thesis defense.

In these projects, students are also encouraged to be an assistant in open scientific research platforms. For example, in the fight against Coronavirus Disease 2019, students joined research teams to develop self-testing kits for the detection of antibodies to coronaviruses. They were involved in the production of monoclonal antibodies and test papers. Moreover, students actively introduced the use of paper tests to the public using new media, which greatly facilitated the prevention and control of epidemics and allowed them to feel a sense of pride in their work.

3.4. Engaging in internships to enhance students' technical skills

Imparting theoretical knowledge in classroom settings risks the possibility of turning learning into mere rhetoric on paper. In the new era, strengthening labor education requires college and university students to step out of the classroom and actively participate in internships. However, some college and university students do not cherish internship opportunities. They possess high expectations from life and want to make a difference in major matters instead of small things. This reflects the misunderstanding of labor concepts among college and university students. In fact, only by taking the initiative to participate in internships and practical trainings can one figure out his or her strengths and interests, and enhance the labor skills needed to do better in the society.

Internship can equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their careers and better prepare them for the transformation of their roles from “college and university students” to “full-fledged members of the society.” Different educational resources from schools and the society can be utilized during internships to provide students with an opportunity to enhance their technical skills and preadapt themselves to the society. For example, during internship at hospitals, medical students rotate through several clinical departments and attend targeted lectures and training sessions. They are supervised by clinical healthcare professionals who can help them to establish correct views on diseases and treatment, and make the transition from being a student to being a doctor. During internship at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, students have the remarkable opportunity to transform theoretical knowledge into practical experience within a public health environment. To safeguard the health of the general population, the internship revolves around various areas including epidemiology, the fundamentals of public health, minority health and health disparities, as well as biostatistics. Students learn to timely adjust themselves to the public health needs of the society and apply new technologies to deal with public health concerns.

In addition, during the internships, teachers on campus are required to keep in contact with the interns once or twice a month to understand their situation and progress, thereby ensuring that the interns receive timely support and targeted assistance when facing difficulties and challenges.

4. Effects of strengthening labor education for college and university students with the indicated pathways

In this study, we analyze the effect of these practical pathways in strengthening labor education through a survey that included 967 college and university students, with 960 valid questionnaires.

4.1. Labor courses and campus activities deepen students' understanding of labor

The survey shows that 940 students (97.92%) think that labor courses greatly help them to build a strong labor will. They become more willing to clean the classrooms and disinfect public facilities on campus. Students working as teaching assistants report that they now have a better understanding of the links between different subjects and their knowledge structure is significantly improved. Students in science labs understand more about the use of various experimental equipment and the principle of different assays. Volunteers in the library

understand better about how to classify books of different subjects and gain an access to World's Classics. In response to the question "Do you think that weekly hygiene assessments can help to cultivate good hygiene habits?," 951 students believe that they can, while the remaining 9 students think that they cannot, accounting for 99.06% and 0.94%, respectively. All students express the idea that they are willing to help to create a clean and hygienic environment in dormitories, classrooms, and other areas on campus. They now become more respectful to campus cleaners, librarians, laboratory assistants, and dorm assistants, and recognize that every profession is honorable and should not be judged merely by social positions. 99.48% students acknowledge that the inspiring deeds of model workers are very helpful for them to foster strong labor awareness. 97.40% students accept the inclusion of the performance in labor courses and practical activities as an important part in the final evaluation.

These results demonstrate that labor courses and campus activities can significantly help students to better understand the value of work and its role in the society, and teach them to respect labor and appreciate the contributions of workers in various fields.

4.2. Social practices help students to develop a strong work ethic

The survey shows that 942 students (98.13%) agree that social practices of various kinds greatly help them to improve communication skills and time management skill. 945 students (98.44%) think that they now have a better understanding of social divisions, professions, and individual difference. All students report that they have better recognized their strengths and weaknesses through participating in different social practices such as protecting water resources, popularizing blood and organ donations, teaching left-behind children, and conducting first-aid training programs. They now truly understand that success in any field requires effort and perseverance, and they are willing to put in a lot of work to achieve their goals. Students working as volunteer teachers in rural areas report that they have greatly improved their abilities and qualities in the practical fields, and understood more about the reality in less developed regions. Students serving as volunteers in popularization of the vaccination campaign and disease prevention and control movement feel a sense of pride in their major, and understand that vaccine acceptance by communities is key to achieving sufficient immunization coverage to end the global pandemic.

These results demonstrate that social practices can help students to acquire practical skills in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management. Through conducting various labor-themed social practices, students can gain a better understanding of themselves, different social groups, as well as national reality, and develop a sense of social responsibility and a strong work ethic.

4.3. Project-based researches enhance students' competitiveness in the society

The survey shows that 956 students (99.58%) believe that doing scientific research projects greatly help them to recognize their shortcomings and weaknesses in learning. They all express the idea to improve their knowledge structure based on scientific research practices. 940 students (97.92%) students report that their labor attitude has been corrected by participating in different project-based researches and they now fully understand that only through hard work can individuals truly cherish what they have gained. All students acknowledge that doing scientific research projects significantly improves their interest in learning and science, as evidenced by the increasing number of students to apply for scientific research projects and the improved quality of students' research proposals. In response to "Do you think that participating in scientific research projects can help to enhance your hands-on skills, communication skills, and writing skills?," 945 students (98.44%) think that they have improved a lot in these aspects through scientific research projects. Students working in open scientific

research platforms believe that their analytical skills, logical reasoning skills, and argumentative skills have improved significantly through choosing the research topic, conducting the experiment, analyzing the results, and applying for funding support. They feel a sense of pride in the development of new technologies for the detection of diseases, including Coronavirus Disease 2019. Besides, some students even report that their promotion skills have improved through promoting the acceptance of communities to use vaccines for disease prevention and control.

These results demonstrate that the enthusiasm of students for doing scientific research projects has been fully mobilized, and their interest in learning and science has been significantly improved. They now tend to respect labor and cherish the fruits of labor. In addition, the entire process of scientific research projects improves students' hands-on skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills, as well as teamwork awareness, and greatly helps them to learn much knowledge that cannot be learned in classes, which then leads to increased competitiveness in the society.

4.4. Internships prepare students for future work

The survey shows that 934 students (97.29%) believe that engaging in internships helps them to understand their majors better. They begin to realize the roles of their majors in the society and find the best matching point between their majors and social needs. 940 students (97.91%) acknowledge that internships allow them to recognize their strengths and interests more clearly. They have experienced real-life labor practices during internships and would now choose their careers based on their abilities and skills instead of unrealistic expectations for high salaries. 922 students (96.04%) agree that preadaptation to the society through internships helps them to build self-assuredness that allows them to face challenges, take risks, and pursue their goals with conviction. All students are thankful to the mental health support provided by teachers, mentors, and healthcare professionals.

These results demonstrate that participating in internships can help to hone students' willpower, enhance their ability to overcome setbacks, and promote the improvement of their social adaptability. In addition, internships help students to establish a correct perspective on employment and careers. During the internship, students learn to timely adjust their employment expectations based on their abilities and interests, make reasonable career choices, and strive to balance their personal career aspirations with their abilities, interests, as well as social needs.

5. Conclusion

The development and progress of a country depends greatly on the quality of its workforce. Labor serves as an important vehicle for individual growth. China's central authorities have unveiled a guideline on strengthening education on hardworking spirit among college and university students in the new era ^[7]. The guideline aims at calling on students to acquire basic working capability for livelihood and individual development, and form good working habits.

In this study, we summarized four specific pathways to strengthen labor education for college and university students, and found that setting up labor-related courses and campus activities, conducting social practices, sponsoring scientific research projects, and engaging in internships can enable students to link theory with practice, recognize their strengths and interests, respect more cordially for the working class, and better understand the responsibilities and historical mission bestowed upon their generation by the times.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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