Working is now a fundamental responsibility for many undergraduates. But understanding how employment affects students’ educational experiences is complicated by why students work. Many students must work to pay the costs of attending college. As College Board policy analyst Sandy Baum argues in a 2010 collection of essays I edited, *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications for Policy and Practice*, while some of these students are awarded “work” as part of their financial aid package, other students either do not receive work-study funding or find such awards insufficient to cover the costs of attendance. Some traditional-age students may use employment as a way to explore career options or earn spending money. For other students, particularly adult students, work is a part of their identity, as Carol Kasworm, a professor of adult education at North Carolina State University, and other contributors to *Understanding the Working College Student* point out. Regardless of the reason for working, trying to meet the multiple and sometimes conflicting simultaneous demands of the roles of student, employee, parent, and so on often creates high levels of stress and anxiety, making it less likely that students will complete their degrees.

**Reconceptualizing Work**

Although students who work have an obligation to fulfill their academic responsibilities, colleges and universities also have a responsibility to ensure that all students—including those who work—can be successful.

One obvious approach is for colleges and universities to reduce students’ financial need to work by reducing the rate of tuition growth and increasing need-based grants. Colleges and universities can also reduce the prevalence and intensity of employment through financial aid counseling that informs students of both the consequences of working and alternative mechanisms of paying for college. Nonetheless, given the recent economic recession (and its implications for tuition, financial aid, and students’ financial resources) as well as the centrality of jobs to students’ identities, many will likely continue to work substantial numbers of hours.

Even on campuses where relatively few students work and those who do work relatively few hours and primarily on rather than off campus, the applicable research suggests that reconceptualizing “work” and its role in students’ learning and engagement could be beneficial. Often professors and administrators believe that employment pulls students’ attention away from their academic studies; they define any time spent in paid employment as necessarily reducing the amount of time available for learning.