

United States: Ethnographies of Work

Enabling agency and challenging inequality through critical investigation of the labour market.

The Ethnographies of Work (EOW) programme created at Guttman Community College in New York State is aimed at young people in the first years of tertiary education, but has many useful lessons for secondary provision. The programme was developed in a (two-year) higher education institution that predominantly serves young people from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds. All students are required to participate in the EOW programme. The social science course is built around an explicit theory of action: “students who understand the meaning of work in human lives, the sociology of the professions and who have some professional work experience will have greater agency in entering the labour market than those who believe only a credential is needed. In addition, students who understand the challenges that being different imposes in the professional world – being working class, dark skinned, speaking with an accent – will, armed with that knowledge, enter the job market alert to the meanings of these aspects of identity” (Hoffman, 2018^[56]).

Over the duration of the programme, students spend an average of three hours a week developing career readiness through:

- academic consideration of theoretical and ethnographic works about the nature and experience of work;
- development of the skills related to ethnographic investigation (research design, observation, mapping and interviewing);
- group research projects focusing on questions associated with the world of work (such as challenges faced by women in senior information technology positions, how professionals in the financial services industry balance work and family responsibilities and the experiences of workers in on-demand gig economy jobs);
- interviews with people doing jobs of personal interest;
- a work placement involving an ethnographic study into workplace operation in a field related to career ambitions;
- personal reflection on workplace and community experiences, career-related strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and development of skills related to résumé creation, networking and interviewing (Hoffman, 2018^[56]).

The programme is explicitly designed moreover, to develop the social capital of students whose family-based networks are commonly narrow and limited with regard to the professional occupations sought by students (Hoffman, 2018^[56]). The EOW programme consequently integrates career exploration and experience into an individualised academic curriculum, developing critical understanding of the labour while providing experiences of value to career progression (Gatta, 2020^[234]).

Gatta, M. and N. Ziehmke (2020), “Ethnographies of Work: A Transformative Framework for Career Learning” in Hoffman, N. and M. L. Collins, eds. Teaching Students About the World of Work - A Challenge to Postsecondary Educators. Harvard Education Press.

Hoffman, N. (2018), "Ethnographies of work and possible futures: new ways for young people to learn about work and choose a meaningful first career", in Mann, A. et al. (eds). *Essays on Employer Engagement in Education*. Routledge.

Adapted from: Mann, A., V. Denis and C. Percy (2020), "Career ready?: How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 241, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e1503534-en>.