

THE CASE FOR PUSHBACK: WHY DISAGREEMENT STRENGTHENS OUR WORK

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ARTICLE 11

One of the quiet problems with professional social media is that we often confuse agreement with support. A “Like” is too easy and while we all know my preference for the “Celebrate” and “Support” reactions, neither require any depth. Those reactions signal that something meaningful is happening. But even they fall short of what truly strengthens a community of practice.

Maybe it is because I am a brainstormer, (affirmed by my YouScience results) but to me, the most meaningful form of support is not ‘agreement’ at all...it is thoughtful ‘pushback’, offered publicly or privately, with the shared goal of making the work better. Real amplification happens when we engage ideas seriously, especially when we disagree.

Pushback = Push forward

No, this isn’t oxymoronic. And here are three recent examples that I can provide as support.

The first two come from conversations with Kristy Volesky, one of my closest professional allies

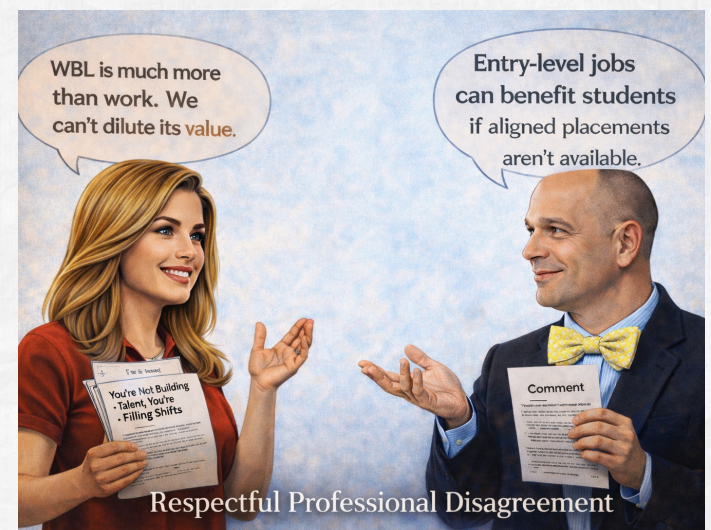
The first was sparked by an article written by Kristy and featuring Amanda Daniels, titled “You’re Not Building Talent, You’re Filling Shifts.” I commented publicly, highlighting lines that resonated, offering agreement on the need for exposure and advocacy, and then offering a measured pushback. I argued that part-time work can still have value for students when pathway-aligned placements are unavailable, provided it is not treated as a capstone or end goal.

Kristy responded with clarity and conviction. She agreed that entry-level jobs can be a stepping stone, but she drew a firm line between working and work-based learning. Her concern was not that students work, but that we dilute WBL by labeling experiences students can obtain on their own as something more than they are. Her response did not dismiss my point. It refined it. The distinction she articulated made the system stronger, more honest, and more defensible. (I’ll paste this whole conversation as well as a link to Kristy and Amanda’s article as an appendix.)

The second example never happened in public at all. This time, in preparing for an article that I was about to publish, which included a decision matrix on how we frame a student. Kristy and I had a private conversation where we disagreed on how we frame students. Not on outcomes. Not on values. On framing. We both made the case for why our preferred lens was stronger for students. Neither of us “won.” What we gained instead was sharper language, clearer reasoning, and fewer blind spots.

This is how healthy professional disagreement works.

The third example comes from my good friend, Jeremy Smith, who recently shared on an episode of the Disrupt Education podcast that he prefers the term “soft skills” and does not believe it is worth changing for the sake of semantics. That view is in direct contrast to my own writing, where I have argued that the term actively undermines the value of durable skills. Jeremy and I remain close allies on many other issues. We simply disagree here. That disagreement does not weaken either position. It clarifies them.



Visibility -vs- Courage

Echo chambers are a fool's environment. If everyone agrees with us, our thinking never has to mature. And if two people agree on everything, one of them doesn't need to exist! The people I trust most within my circles of influence are the ones who say things like, "Let me play devil's advocate here," or, "This is where I would push back." Those phrases are not threats. They are gifts.

There is also an important distinction to be made between visibility and courage. Posting agreeable content in a receptive space is visibility. Publishing an idea that you know may draw critique, and then staying present for the conversation, that is courage. Too often, we conflate engagement metrics with impact. A post that draws universal affirmation may feel good, but a post that invites disagreement, and survives it, often does far more work. The goal is not to win the comment section. The goal is to refine the thinking that shapes programs, policies, and practices that affect real people.

Healthy disagreement also serves as a form of professional stewardship. When we challenge ideas thoughtfully, we are protecting the integrity of the work itself. Silence can be a kind of negligence. If a framework is weak, unclear, or incomplete, letting it pass unexamined does not preserve harmony. It preserves fragility. Pushback, when offered in good faith, forces us to articulate why we believe what we believe, where our assumptions live, and what evidence actually supports our claims. That process does not fracture a community of practice. It matures it.

Thought-leadership: Ditching the Echo Chamber for the Anti-Chamber

This is the part we often misunderstand about thought leadership.

Thought leadership does not mean your thoughts are always right, finished, or beyond reproach. It means you are willing to make your thinking public, invite critique, and accept pushback for the sake of building a more solid foundation of understanding. It is an act of epistemic humility. Our community of practice grows stronger not because we agree, but because our ideas are stress-tested in the open.

There is, of course, a line. Disagreement should never devolve into personal insults. We covered that already in our last article, "Laughing at the Elevator"...by the way, I am still bald! Challenge the idea. Pressure-test the framework. But if you want your ideas to be taken seriously, just don't attack the person. Ad hominem fallacy is at best a diversion tactic for one's own weak ideas! Arguing against the person is not amplifying a voice, it is an attempt to silence one.

If we want better systems, better programs, and better outcomes for students, we need visible support, honest disagreement, and colleagues who care enough to poke holes in our thinking and ideas. Not to tear them down, but to make sure they can stand.

That is real amplification.



Link to Decision
Matrix on
'Student Frames'

Link to Article on
'Soft Skills'



Appendix A:

Below is the conversation on LinkedIn that includes professional encouragement, edification, and also a challenge for clarification. No feelings were hurt, no insults exchanged...but ideas were strengthened!

Jason Van Nus · You
Gentle Disruptor | Keynote Speaker | Presenter | Ap... 3mo ...

So many nuggets here to mine [Kristy Volesky](#) & [Amanda Daniels](#)

I love this line, "It's about learning what a career entails, including the knowledge, skills, expectations, and pathways required to grow and advance in the field." This has inspired an idea for a project...I'll share with you later.

Amanda's line, "Students cannot dream it if they cannot see it." is so true! This is why I am such a huge fan of [YouScience](#) because it opens up the world of careers and pushes students beyond what they are familiar with and/or previously exposed to!

Those excuses are real. The "under 18" excuse is very common, but the other two are also sneaky prevalent! Employers tend to think that they are being asked to babysit--this usually goes away with an 'Access to Talent' conversation--I like your verbage of 'talent gate'.

I have a slight pushback to provide for thought and conversation! I do see value in part-time work...when career and pathway-aligned placements are not available, students can learn and practice the employable and durable skills that are ubiquitous across all jobs. This, however, should be the exception and is not a long-term solution. Students should be moved into an aligned placement as soon as possible!

Like · 🍷 3 | Reply · 5 replies | 147 impressions

Amanda Daniels · 1st
Work-based learning and college/career readi... 3mo ...

Jason Van Nus this is a public-forum worthy discussion!

The numbers are there to show a steady decline in the number of high-school age young adults engaging in paid employment. I would wager, that if we layered that data with the years employers have been decrying the durable skills in new hires, we would see a correlation. So, that is to say, I strongly believe part time employment has massive educational value for our young adults. However, the science of learning has shown that metacognition, feedback, and personal reflection are what help brains draw connections between behavior and results. A part-time job without these supports is likely just a labor solution (filling shifts)and not workforce solution (skill building). Tell us more about how you are leveraging part-time employment to support your learners.

Like · 🌱 1 | Reply

Kristy Volesky · 1st
National Strategist for CTE, Work-Based Lear... 3mo ...

Jason Van Nus I appreciate the comments and the feedback. There is tremendous value in part-time employment and those first jobs are important in developing basic employment skills. However, in the landscape of work-based learning and the goals to move our students forward, I see part-time, entry-level jobs for students as a pre-requisite for work-based learning programs.

I would be curious for another data dive on this: How often are our most vulnerable students ushered into part-time, entry-level jobs for credit as their capstone versus internship and apprenticeship capstones their more privileged peers get to access? How are we raising the bar and advocating for students to access the greatest experience possible versus the easiest (part-time jobs that the students can already obtain)? If we aren't advocating for students to access internships and apprenticeships, who will?

I know you, **Jason**, work feverishly to ensure students are not stuck in part-time jobs that don't lead to livable wages. I wish more programs worked as diligently as you versus the easy route, accepting students for what they can already obtain on their own as good enough. We have to push for more if we want graduates with skills to help grow our economy.

Love · ❤️ 1 | Reply



Link to Kristy's article featuring Amanda Daniels

Kristy Volesky · 1st
National Strategist for CTE, Work-Based Lear... 3mo ...

Jason Van Nus - I don't think there is anything wrong with entry-level jobs as a pre-requisite to work-based learning (WBL) experiences. In fact, it has been my experience it is difficult for students to maintain a professional experience without that first job experience under their belt.

What I am suggesting is that we separate the two. If a school feels like the student needs to temporarily be in an entry-level job while building skills for an internship or apprenticeship, that is fine. But don't count it as WBL and don't use it as a capstone for the student. If the entry-level job is truly a stepping stone, then it should be categorized as such.

Without the distinction between the two, we are recycling experiences students can obtain on their own and slapping the work-based learning label on it.

There is room for a district to offer support and advocacy for students who have been unable to successfully obtain part-time employment. [Mindi Heitland](#) has done this with career services at Waukee Schools - that helps students and community members seeking employment find job matches.

In order to advance WBL that advances opportunities for students, we need to distinguish a difference between working and work-based learning.

Support · 🍷 1 | Reply

Jason Van Nus · You
Gentle Disruptor | Keynote Speaker | Presente... 3mo ...

Amanda Daniels & **Kristy Volesky** certainly, but a brief caveat first- 'filling shifts' should be a placeholder, not a long-term solution! A holding placement where a student can learn basic skills while I try to locate a better aligned placement.

'Filling shifts' has value for me in the following contexts:

- 1) I want to be someone known for meeting the needs of business/industry. Every job categorized as a 'filling shifts' placement for one student, could also be a perfect fit for another. If through filling shifts (temporary placement) I become associated with solving labor issues for my community/employers, they'll become partners for me long-term (established Proof-of-concept) & available for the next, better aligned student.
- 2) A significant economic component to my program, allowing me to be recognized & valued as an Economic engine for my local community. It affords my program immediate legitimacy when speaking with community leaders/elected officials...which open doors for future placements.
- 3) Allows me to help students who, in my rural region are sometimes partial providers for the family, helping pay bills and provide. I take students in a 'filling shifts' capacity while I look for a better aligned and paying solution.

Like | Reply | 12 impressions