

YOU NEED TO GET A JOB– BUT YOU BETTER KEEP YOUR GRADES UP: CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS IN TODAY’S ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, American students have seen a dramatic increase in college tuition and expenses (Fethke, 2006). To offset this increase in college expense, many students have taken on part time or even full time work (Gose, 1998; Nonis and Hudson, 2006). In addition to, or because of, the burden of lack of focus and exhaustion, students are reporting a decline in the number of hours spent studying (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). To compound this problem, many states offer scholarships that are based on a minimum student grade point average (GPA) (GA Student Finance Commission; SC Commission on Higher Education; College Pays- We Can get You There). The pressure to make good grades, while working more hours to pay for tuition has created disconnect between university expectations and student behavior. Universities expect students to focus on academics, while at the same time continue to increase the cost of enrollment. Students understand the necessity to pay the bills, while at the same time succeeding academically. This paper will address the dissonance created by the demands of academic rigor as opposed to the economic demands of obtaining a college education.

This research focused on students’ perception of the relationship between academic endeavor and working. In addition, student perception of the university’s role in this dynamic was also examined. Students responded to a series of questions examining both student and university responsibility in this growing problem. Results indicate that students believe that the university should be more helpful and accommodating of students that must work to pay for college expense. The authors address implications of this dynamic and suggest implications for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The cost of tuition in higher education has gone up drastically in the last 10 years. According to the College Board, the average cost of tuition and fees at a four-year private college rose 5.9% to \$22,218 for 2006-07. Public colleges rose at a rate of 6.3%. Even though the cost of a public college is less for tuition and fees (\$5836) when room and board are added it becomes \$12,796 for public institutions and \$ 30,367 for private schools (How College Savings Plans Ease the Worry, 2007). The College Board estimates that a moderate budget for miscellaneous expenses (excluding transportation) is \$3,700 per school year. In a survey conducted by Zogby International, students and parents agreed that their biggest expense other than tuitions, room and board, and books was car upkeep. The Zogby study also reported that 89% of college students have cell phones. One parent complained that the most shocking cost he encountered was “that darned cell-phone bill” (Elmer, 2006).

With this dramatic increase in college tuition and expenses, many college students now work to either support themselves or to pay for the items that their parents can not provide. Many students today consider cars, cell phones and fashionable clothing a necessity. Many are not willing to give up these items; therefore, they work in order to afford them. Students now choose to live off campus and this creates the necessity for cars and the added expenses associated with a vehicle. As a result of working more hours, many students now report a decline in the number of hours that they spend studying (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). To compound this problem, many states offer scholarships that are based on a minimum student grade point average (GPA) (GA Student Finance Commission; SC Commission on Higher Education; College Pays- We Can get You There). If a student fails to maintain the required GPA, he or she loses the scholarship. This requires that students either take out loans or work more hours if they want to continue their collegiate experience.

This pressure to make good grades while working more hours has created a disconnect between university expectations and student behavior. Universities expect students to focus on academics and at the same time they continue to increase the cost of enrollment. Students understand the necessity to pay bills, while at the same time to succeed academically. This paper addresses the dissonance created by the demands of academic rigor as opposed to the economic demands of obtaining a college education.

Global changes from an industrial era to a knowledge era have made a college education crucial. We have reached an era of “achieving greater expectations”. These new expectations require shared responsibility, not only among universities and students, but also with the community as a whole. High schools, business leaders, media, and accrediting bodies must help create a society where knowledge is valued and everyone has access to an excellent education (Nellen and Turner, 2007). Success will not come easy when students face the challenge of increasing tuition, working more hours and increasing debt to repay. They will need the support of not only their parents and universities, but also the companies they work for to be able to manage their studies, finances, and time.

Faculty often believe that school should be the only priority and often have little or no patience or sympathy with late or missed assignments because of work. Students often use work as an excuse for being unable to meet deadlines or group meetings for shared assignment responsibilities. Students’ management of time to meet the expectation of their professors, coupled with their work responsibilities, often causes both their educational expectations and work experiences to be less than an ideal situation.

METHODOLOGY

To access the students’ perception of the relationship between academic endeavor and working, 121 students at a small public institution were surveyed. In addition, the survey examined the students’ perception to the university’s role in this dynamic.

The average age of the population was 22.6 with a range of 18-43 and included 52 males and 69 females. There were 42 African-Americans, 71 Caucasians and 7 of other races included in the survey. The study included 27 accounting students, 7 finance, 54 management, 13 marketing, and 19 from other areas. In addition to the demographic questions, students were asked to give specific answers as to their actual GPA, average number of hours per week they worked, average hours per weeks they studied, and their involvement in campus organizations. They were also asked to estimate what their GPA would be if they did not work. Other specific questions covered rearrangement of tests or assignments because of work

and whether they had student loans. In addition they were asked to respond to a series of 11 questions on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

RESULTS

Subjects reported they worked an average of 21.5 hours per week. As reported, 16.6% of students did not work at all or worked less than 10 hours per week. However, 36.7% reported working between 10 and 20 hours with 46.7% reporting working more than 20 hours per week. Twenty-five percent of students who work more than 20 hours per week are working 40 – 50 hours per week.

Students reported studying less than half the number of hours they work. The average number of hours per week students studied was 9.4. Fifty-two percent of students reported no involvement in student organizations, 22% were involved with only 1, 16% with 2, and 10% of students were involved in 3 or more organizations.

When students estimated what their GPA would be if they did not work, the average rose from an actual of 2.96 to an estimated GPA of 3.25. This seems to indicate that students admit that working does cause a GPA to be lower, but that the necessity of working overrides that effect. While they are cognizant of the importance of good grades, they also must work enough to provide the necessities or perceived necessities that their parents did not provide.

The chart below provides a list of the other items asked on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 Strongly Agree.

Question	Average All 100%	Average 20 Hours or Less 53.3%	Average 20 Hours or More 46.7%
1. It is necessary for me to work to meet living expenses.	3.94	3.48**	4.43**
2. The university should arrange class schedules to help working students have more choices for class schedules.	4.36	4.08**	4.66**
3. Professors should understand if students who work are late for class because of work schedules.	3.40	3.30	3.50
4. Professors should understand if working students miss project deadlines because of work.	2.51	2.48	2.55
5. Professor should understand that working students can not always attend class because work schedules.	2.54	2.51	2.58

Question	Average All 100%	Average 20 Hours or Less 53.3%	Average 20 Hours or More 46.7%
6. After graduation, I will remain with the job I currently have.	1.86	1.72	2.01
7. The university should provide tutors for all classes.	3.98	4.02	3.94
8. Students who work should have first choice for class scheduling	2.58	2.25**	2.93**
9. It is unfair for working students to receive special consideration.	2.92	2.97	2.86
10. My degree will enable me to obtain a job that I want.	4.55	4.54	4.57
11. GPA's are important to employers when selecting new employees.	3.35	3.53*	3.15*

* P < .05 ** P < .01

DISCUSSION

Items 1, 2, 8, and 11 produced significant differences between the two groups – those who work 20 hours or less and those who work more than 20 hours.

Based on the results, it appears that many students who work are working because it is a necessity. Item 1 suggests they are providing their own living expenses in addition to costs for school. Working is not a choice for them but a necessity. As expected, those students who work the most hours must do so to meet living expenses.

Item 2 suggests students also believe that universities should have more choices for class schedules so they can meet their work and school requirements. This is more of a problem at smaller schools because there are fewer sections to choose. At times, there is only one time slot for upper level classes and often there are students who have problems meeting class because of work schedules. The difference in the perception of students who work 20 hours or less and those who work more than 20 hours is significant. Those who work the most feel much more strongly that universities should give them wider choices for class schedules.

Items 3, 4, and 5 are related questions which deal with classroom leniency. There was a significant difference in Items 3 and 4 (1.04E-07) and 3 and 5 (1.02E-07). It seems that students believe professors should be more understanding about their being late for class than students missing project deadlines or not coming to class at all. Being late for class is acceptable to both groups of students, but missing projects and deadlines are not. However, most professors do not know if tardiness or absence is due to work or some other reason unless they ask. Although 83% of the students taking the survey worked more than 10 hours per week, only 17.4% of them reported asking professors to rearrange tests or assignments

because of work. They apparently are aware of the pressures of work and school and are meeting basic requirements even when they work.

Item 7 suggest that both groups of students believe universities should provide them with tutors for classes if they are needed. Students are concerned about costs, but yet they expect universities to provide better scheduling, more classes, and tutors for all classes. These items are understandable, but students do not seem to make the connection between added services and cost.

There is a significant difference in the perception of students concerning first choice for scheduling. As item 8 reports, those who work the most hours believe they should have first choice for schedules. However, neither group was concerned with working students receiving special consideration.

All the students believed strongly that their degree would help them get the job that they desired. However, those that worked more were inclined to think GPA was not as important to employers as those who worked 20 hours or less.

Those students who work the most also believe that GPA's do not matter as much to employers. This belief may be a tradeoff because many of them have GPA's that are less than they would be if they did not work so many hours. Students who work 20 hours or less believe more strongly that GPA's do matter to employers.

Sixty-eight percent of students surveyed reported that they have student loans. If tuition costs continue to rise, this percentage will probably also rise along with the number of students who work more than 20 hours per week.

CONCLUSION

The future suggests that tuition will continue to rise dramatically, far outpacing inflation. This means that more and more students will have to balance the scales between work and higher education. Students believe professors should understand their dilemma and work with them to help them be able to earn money and go to school. Universities and professors must address this issue if many of these students are to continue their education. Universities can address some scheduling issues by providing alternate class times in consecutive semesters. This may mean a student will have to wait a semester for a class to meet his or her schedule, but it will provide them the opportunity for flexibility. A long range plan for class times can be generated so students can plan ahead to get the required courses. This will mean that professors may have to teach in times that are not the most desired. Universities can also provide counseling services, time management seminars, and assistance in finding available financial aid. These services are now provided by many universities, but students need to be aware that they are offered.

Another option for universities and students is now available because of advancements in technology. On-line classes can now be offered for more flexibility in scheduling. However, students need to be aware that an on-line class puts more of the burden for learning on them. Also, some courses are difficult to offer on line because of the nature of the course and not all professors are willing to teach on-line courses.

Most universities are providing help for students that need it with special labs for math and English. The problem is that students do not always know where to find the help and help is not as readily available for

all classes. Universities can provide names of those qualified to tutor in all subjects. Professors and advisors need to be aware of student needs and the resources available so they can direct them to the proper places to receive assistance.

Students also need to be advised that it is not necessary to take a full load if they must work 40 hours or more. They should be encouraged to scale back the number of classes and simply take longer to complete their degree. Universities need to place importance on quality and help students get the education they need to be successful in the work world.

Students must be willing to accept less hours per semester if they need to work in excess of 20 hours per week. They also need to understand the importance of keeping their professors and employers informed when a potential conflict arises. Many times professors and employers will work with a student to solve a conflict if they know in advance.

Employers also have an opportunity to attract quality personnel by providing benefits to their employees who are also furthering their education. They can provide flexible working hours for their student employees, give them tuition assistance, and allow them to take time off when it is really necessary for their school work.

The dilemma that universities and professors are facing is how to help students manage their educational expectations, finances and time without sacrificing the quality of education that is provided. There is no easy solution and universities, faculty, and students and employers must work together on these issues.

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