

The Balance of Work and School in Relation to Stress  
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Introduction

To be a working college student, the student must attempt to balance work, school and life. This balancing act seems to go hand-in-hand with level of stress. In fact, females, first year students, and full time college students actually perceived a greater level of stressors (in comparison to all other students), which lead to an increase in stress (Fogaratnam & Buchanan, 2004). Considering about half of all college students work, the topic deserves much attention (Dundes & Marx, 2006). In addition to work related stress, the rising cost of tuition and living expenses over the years seems relentless. In fact, according to National Center for Educational Statistics NCES (2011), about 60% of college students say their parents expect them to work in order to help cover their living expenses. Also, about 31% of full time students work 1 to 15 hours per week (with many students working more than this). Further, students who attend a 4 year public institution are more likely to work (41% of students attending a 4 year public institution work) compared to about 35% of students who attend a 4 year private institution. Despite these important statistics, it seems as though the research focusing on the school-work balance of undergraduates is grossly inadequate and not in agreement. This study will explore the possible links between students' stress level, the amount of time they spend on work and the amount of time they spend on homework outside of class.

According to Dundes and Marx's study of over 250 college students, students who worked 10-19 hours per week were actually more likely to have a higher GPA than students who work either less than 10 hours per week or more than 20 hours per week. Again, they found that those students who work 10-19 hours per week are more likely to spend more time studying versus non working students and students who work either less than 10 hours or more than 20 hours per week. Most importantly though, 64% of the students who work reported that their work increased their stress level and 57% reported that their work reduced the time they would normally want to spend doing assignments (2011). However, Fogaratnam and Buchanan found different results. They concluded that there was no statistically significant difference between the amount of hours worked per week and GPA. Additionally, there was no difference between the amount of stress and the students' GPA. However, it is interesting to note that females, first years, and full time college students actually perceived a greater exposure to stressors, but many of these stressors were not work or school related (2004).

In addition, Snelgar (1989) did a study on the relationship between stress at work and school performance in 83 university students. In addition to the measures of role ambiguity and conflict, the study looked at student stress (in terms of physical, mental, and emotional fatigue) and failure rate (where students noted how many exams they failed while working part-time). The study concluded that there is a high correlation between stress and failure rate. The study went on to say that this may be due to having a stressful working environment, which then transcends into stress in school, and increases the tendency of failing exams. One interesting thing about this study is that the participants consisted of 75 male students, and 8 female students. It might be possible that male students rate stress differently than female students. In addition, the study points out that family settings can contribute to student stress level, including

financial stress. Furthermore, the study admitted that it's both difficult to assess stress levels in general, but also hard to look at it over time as stress can change on a daily basis.

Similarly, Hudson and O'Regan (1994) studied student stress level as related to several predictors such as year in school and the number of hours spent working each week. The study utilized 240 graduate student volunteers from the Minnesota School of Professional Psychology (MSPP). The students filled out a questionnaire regarding stress level, year in school, how much they work, and several other factors. The study found that no significant difference existed between year in school and stress level or between number of hours worked and student stress level. This contradicts other studies that did find significance between number of hours worked and stress level. Furthermore, the study mentioned that the group with the most stress was single women working full-time. Although this study didn't find a strong relationship between year in school, working, and student stress, it did point out that women who work a lot (and are single) have the highest level of stress.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The participants in the present study attended a small Midwestern all female University in the United States where the population of the participants ranged in age, but all were at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited from General Psychology courses and invited to fill out the survey at the beginning of the class period. The respondents were from a wide variety of majors (26 different majors were reported). The majority of respondents were first year college students (76.8%). One hundred participants were invited to fill out the questionnaire and 98 returned the questionnaire (giving a response rate of 98%).

### *Measures*

The questionnaire contained some items about demographics like the participant's year in school, major and number of credits. The average estimated hours worked per week, hours spent on homework outside of class per week, and hours of sleep obtained per night on school nights were written in number form by the participants. When the participants gave a range of number, the median was selected and entered for analysis. Further, participants were able to indicate their response on a scale of 1 to 10 about their stress level over the previous week and how healthy they eat on a regular basis. On the scale, a 1 was identified with a "low" or "very unhealthy" anchor while a 10 was identified with a "high" or "very healthy" anchor. Therefore, the present data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and by conducting correlations between eight of the items.

## Results

As can be seen in Table 1, most of the students analyzed were working on a regular weekly basis ( $n=73/98$ : 74.5%) with the majority of those students working between one and nine hours ( $n=31/73$ : 31.7%) and the least amount of students working 21 or more hours

( $n=16/73$ : 21.9%). Further, the majority of students spent about 10-20 hours per week on homework ( $n=60/96$ : 62.5%). There was no significant difference in amount of participants who indicated that their work schedule makes meeting school deadlines more difficult (Table 2). However, this trend is different when isolating the students who reported working more than 15 hours per week. In fact, significantly more participants perceived school deadlines more difficult to meet if they worked more than 15 hours ( $n=25/33$ : 71.4%). Also, Table 3 shows that most students reported achieving less than eight hours of sleep ( $n=74/96$ : 77.1%). However, many participants eat moderately ( $n=34/97$ : 35.1%) or very healthy ( $n=42/97$ : 43.3%).

The number of credit hours and hours spent working during the week were found to be significant as well as stress level when compared to work hours. Hours spent on homework, Diet, sleep, hours spent working and year in school were not found to have a significant relationship with stress.

Table 1. Working Students

	N	Percent
Students who work on a weekly basis		
Yes	73	74.5
No	25	25.5
Average hours spent working per week		
1-9	31	42.5
10-20	26	35.6
21+	16	21.9

Table 2. Work and School

	N	Percent		
Average hours spent on homework				

1-9	16	16.6		
10-20	60	62.5		
21+	20	20.7		
			Works 15+ hours	
			N	Percent
Work makes meeting school deadlines more difficult				
Yes	44	48.9	25	71.4
No	46	51.1	9	25.7

Table 3. Stress Related Habits

	N	Percent
Average hours of sleep		
4-7.5	74	77.1
8+	22	22.9
Diet		

Less than moderately healthy	21	21.6
Moderately healthy	34	35.1
More than moderately healthy	42	43.3

Table 4. Means, standard deviations and correlations for study variables

Variable	Mean	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Hours worked per week	11.03	10.57							
2. Credits taken this semester	14.91	2.02	-.36**						
3. Hours spent on homework	16.47	9.56	-.15	.21*					

4. Stress level	7.16	1.56	.29**	-.08	.11				
5. Does work make meeting school deadlines more difficult?	1.51	.50	-.49**	.18	.15	-.34**			
6. Hours of sleep	6.73	1.25	-.37**	.15	-.03	-.25*	.32**		
7. Diet	5.66	1.92	-.23**	.12	.05	-.14	.30**	.30**	
8. Year in School	1.32	.65	.43**	-.25*	-.15	.14	-.28**	-.17	-.06

Note. \* $p < .05$  (2-tailed) and \*\* $p < .001$  (2-tailed)

### Discussion

Our first hypothesis stated that there will be a positive correlation between the number of hours that a student works and their level of stress. Indeed, we discovered that as the amount of hours worked increased, stress level increased as well. Therefore, since elevated stress levels are used to indicate an imbalance between work and life, it is concluded that an increased in the amount of hours worked fosters a perceived imbalance between work and life. Second, we hypothesized that those who spent more hours working on homework would also experience an increase in stress level. However, this correlation relationship was very weak and insignificant. In fact, the opposite was found. There was a moderately strong inverse correlation between amount of hours worked on a weekly basis and the difficulty to meet school deadlines due to work schedule. To an extent, this suggests that work can actually promote the efficient completion of school work and somewhat serve as a perceived optimal balance between work and school. This is in accordance with some previous research. Finally, we expected that the participants who worked more than 15 hours per week would report an increase in difficulty to meet school deadlines to their work schedule. Here, the majority of those working 15 or more hours per week did report an increase in difficulty to meet school deadlines.

Many other interesting findings outside the scope of the hypotheses were discovered as well. For example, the majority of students do in fact work. Again this is concurrent with previous research. Also, the majority of students spend an estimated average of about 10-20 hours on homework per week. Further, it was revealed that year in school was correlated with the amount of hours worked per week. So, students who were upperclassmen were more likely to spend more hours working per week.

In other aspects of this study, we found that students were more likely to get less than eight hours of sleep, and this especially depended upon stress level and work. Thus, the more hours students work or the more stressed they were the less sleep they obtained. However, most

students did report eating a moderately to very healthy diet. In accordance, there is no significant relationship between diet and stress level, even though it has long been thought that stress level leads to unhealthy food choices. Further, diet and amount of sleep were correlated such that those who ate healthier were more likely to obtain more hours of sleep and vice versa.

The study does have limitations. First, lives of college students often involve many other factors beyond work and school. A social life and time spent involved in extra-curricular activities are also usually essential for current college students. Further, time spent in important extra-curricular activities may add to stress. However, this study only focused on two aspects of college students' lives. Second, although some students do not work, we must consider the possibility that they may have children and/or other family responsibilities that consume much of their time and attention. Therefore, there are likely outside contributors to stress that were not measured in this study and should be considered in any future research. Next, it may also be important to evaluate GPA in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the students. For example, students who study for many hours and have a high GPA may feel rewarded by their high grades and do not see studying as a stressful event because it yields positive rewards. Also, our sampling was not random which may lead to problems with generalizability of the data. However, we did have a high response rate which may be in part because of the short nature of the questionnaire.

As stated previously, most research focuses on the work-life balance of established adults with careers and families. Therefore, despite its limitations, this study gives further insight into work-life balance of an average college student. It also serves as a basis for further research to strive to discover criteria that has a higher correlation to stress. For example, we found that amount of sleep was correlated to stress but diet, contrary to popular belief, was not.

## References

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