

Pilot Study of Time Commitments of Students at Two Commuter-based Universities (CSUS & ODU): Undergraduate students in Social Work & Human Services

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Abstract

This study examines undergraduate student time commitments at two commuter universities and the implications of these demands on student satisfaction with their experience in higher education.

In my years as a teacher of Human Services in several universities, I have observed an overriding theme which has stood out in all of these institutions of higher learning in relation to classroom time and work requirements.

I have become aware of student complaints concerning what is perceived as a large amount of work required coupled with a lack of time to adequately complete assignments or to come prepared for class discussions. Initially, I believed this to be nothing more than the lament of lazy or unmotivated students, but further analysis has proved that many of these students face incredible time demands, impacting my classes and their college experience in general. At the beginning of each new class, I decided to ask my students to volunteer information about their time commitments and to think about how those commitments may be impacting their satisfaction on all aspects of their lives, specifically their university experience. I was prompted to create a survey because, in my volunteer sessions with my classes, I discovered that many students were overcommitted in a number of areas. These areas included, but were not limited to: the number of jobs held and number of hours worked unrelated to school; their status as single heads of household with childrearing and full financial responsibilities; taking a full course load

(minimum of twelve credits, undergraduate); number of internship hours taken; and number of hours of classroom preparation responsibility.

From the front of the classroom, we collectively calculated these weekly locked-in time commitments and I noted that many students were surprised by the total number of hours they had committed to each week. The discussion became almost comical to many of them when the idea of studying and preparing for classes with the old formula of two hours for every in-class hour was presented as a norm. Most colleagues whom I have spoken with are pragmatic about their hope that students are preparing for each class, but many are realistic and have stated that the level of preparation (two hours) for each hour in class rarely happens with their students.

My hypothesis is that students are not aware of their own time commitments and how the many time pressures will negatively impact and affect their college experience in regards to their GPA as well as their overall intake of material presented in class. The results of this study are consistent with my anecdotal findings in the classroom over my eight years of teaching in higher education.

Literature review

A study of the available literature revealed that non-traditional students were defined as age 24 or older. The majority of students in this current study (54%) were in the age category falling between 18 and 24, 18% fell between 25 and 31, 6% fell between 32 and 37, and 17% in the category were between the ages of 38 and 44. By definition, 46% of the students in this study were over 24 years old and considered “non-traditional”. A study by Marino (1997) found that 43% of all college students were over the age of 24.

The vast majority of students in these programs were female, with a representation of 82% of the respondents. Studies have shown that the demographics of college attendance have changed over the years with current trends; for instance, women constituted 40% of the enrolled population of community colleges in 1970, but by 1999 women comprised 59% of those enrolled (Ryan 2003).

It has been shown that commitments such as significant family responsibilities, work commitment, and off campus obligations can impede academic progress (Durodoye 2000). This current article will attempt to bring the focus of student time commitments into a rational discourse about what is reasonable in terms of expectations that students should have for themselves and the role that institutions and faculty play in constructing these educational responsibilities.

The current study asked several questions similar to those posed by Hammer, et.al. (1998). The results of that study demonstrated a negative relationship between perceived effectiveness of support services and the degree of work/school role conflict in terms of university experience. It was shown that levels of satisfaction went down with more time and role conflict. Frone's research (1992) has similarly shown that a trend towards negative consequences occurred when the demands of work conflicted with family responsibilities. The stress from this conflict often brings about negative life consequences; logically, those negative consequences may also exist when people attempt to balance work, family and student roles simultaneously. Frone concluded that, although there were no significant predictors of work/family conflict, the predictors accounted for a significant amount of variance.

Methodology

This study represents a pilot study intended to begin the discussion about student time commitments and to foster further research in this area.

Undergraduate students in the division of social work at CSU, Sacramento and undergraduates of human services at Old Dominion University were asked to volunteer to participate in a study looking into student time commitments. These institutions are located in California and Virginia respectively and represent commuter campuses with a fairly high number of non-traditional students. The survey is a forced choice design, in which participants check the box in each area that best describes their situation. This current study used convenience samples as they were taken from a variety of courses this researcher taught. The following areas were asked of these

students: age of student, number of credit hours currently enrolled, length in time of commute to campus, current grade point average, status as head of household with primary financial responsibility, number of hours on average per week spent studying/preparing for class, number of student work hours (outside of school related duties), number of credit hours earned to date and finally an open-ended question which gave participants a chance to comment on their time demands in relation to their perceived quality of education in college.

The statistical analysis first looked at frequency distributions and cross tabulations using Pearson's Chi-Square. The overall findings were very similar between the two institutions where the vast majority of undergraduate students were commuters. When asked about employment outside of college responsibilities, 23% worked between 21 and 30 hours per week, 20% worked 31 to 40 hours per week, and 21% worked in excess of 40 hours on an average week. When asked about taking a full load (12 credits or more), 68% disclosed they were in this category. Most (98%) lived off-campus, and 49% were the primary financial supporters of their household. With average stated hours of studying per week, 39% were in the 6 to 10 hours category, 23% in the 0 to 5 hours category, while 21-30 hours studying per week was 19%.

The outcome of this pilot study showed that most students on average work outside of school between 21 to 40 plus hours (64%) and the majority of these students are enrolled full time with almost half being primary financial caretakers as well. Several issues are raised by this study including the question of student preparation; of those students enrolled full-time (12-18 units), surveys found that 55% studied ten hours or less in an average week.

Discussion

As a colleague recently pointed out, it is not as though the time management skills of students has changed, but rather that the students themselves have changed, both in terms of mean age as well as time commitments and outside-school responsibilities. With this in mind, then, there are a number of questions that should be considered. For instance, how should academia deal with the phenomenon of the working students who are simultaneously trying to

raise children while attending school on a full time schedule? Are we in the academy prepared for a paradigm shift that will be reflected in teaching philosophy and class requirements? Do students who come from a different life stage than the past “traditional” students bring a different set of expectations and skills to their college experience? Would such students therefore benefit from a different set of academic assumptions? Given the realities of our changing student population, perhaps now is a good time to consider a pedagogical shift in thinking about college level learning. It may no longer be feasible to have the expectation that requires two or three hours of class preparation for every in-class hour. Instructors may need to consider setting up different types of learning environments that include more experiential learning, more in-class types of exercises and perhaps more on-line coursework suited to the students schedule which could be a beneficial part of the instruction and perhaps a step towards easing the inherent problems in our students’ time management schedules.

On the other hand, it is possible that the discussion of students’ responsibilities should continue to be placed on the students themselves as their own problems and issues to deal with, as reflected in the following points of consideration. Do students fully understand what will be required of them as they enter higher education as well as enter into the system’s prevailing attitude that an optimal educational experience calls for adequate preparation for each class? While many functional counseling services exist for incoming college students, perhaps counselors should take more time to specifically advise those who are overextended to consider a part-time program. The statistics of this study show that the majority of attitudes shared by students coming into four-year colleges reflects either a misunderstanding of university level academic work or an optimistic blindness that keeps them from balancing their lives with their school work. It appears, then, that there are two very different approaches to consider when looking into solutions for these problems. The first has faculty and institutions looking at more creative ways of teaching and the second continues to present the student with an overload of time demands as their problem not the institutions.

I would like to engage in a dialogue with colleagues considering their vision of how this new pedagogy would work. As for now, and until a major overhaul of university or department standards is made, we faculty will continue to give homework in the hope that perhaps someone will come to class prepared to do more than just take notes, a student who has done the reading and is ready to engage in an active dialogue, no matter what their outside commitments dictate.

Considerations for future research

Just as our solutions have two different approaches, so do the questions we must pose for future research implications. In order to understand and put into action any solutions, studies must go further in determining both student and institutional attitudes towards this subject.

Several major questions immediately arise about our predominantly commuter university students. What expectations do they have about their education? Where does their education rank in order of the priority of their lives? What messages are they receiving from high school and university counselors relating to levels of personal prioritizing and commitment to higher education? Is there an impact among first-generation college students in terms of expectations about college? Would findings be similar if studied between a wide sample of university departments?

Questions must also be asked of institutions to fully understand current positions on this topic. Should current curriculum be altered to consider the time-committed student? Are there alternative pedagogical practices that would benefit the learning of our students? Are current attrition trends influenced by the time demands of our students? Are faculty currently engaging in any specific practices aimed at the problem of time committed students?

Limitations

This research would be strengthened by a broader-based study comparing more traditional live-on campus schools with commuter universities and also surveying across divisions/departments. Using a pre-existing work-family conflict scale as an aid towards an

inferential statistical analysis such as regression analysis would give more clarity to the meaning of the findings.

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