Support for Working Students: Understanding the Impacts of Employment on Students' Lives

Rebecca Summer  
*Portland State University, rebeccasummer@pdx.edu*

Megan McCoy  
*Portland State University*

Isabelle Trujillo  
*Portland State University*

Esperanza Rodriguez  
*Portland State University*

---

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honors_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honors_fac)  

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

**Citation Details**  

This Pre-Print is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors College Faculty Publication and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).
Abstract

The majority of college students work, and there are well-documented findings about the impacts of student work on academic performance. However, there is little research on the impacts of this work on other aspects of students’ lives. In this study we ask: What are the impacts of student employment beyond academic performance? Using our methodological approach of student-driven research and a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis, we find that work has four main impacts on students’ lives: it limits flexibility in students’ schedules, leaving them vulnerable in emergencies; it requires students to make difficult financial calculations; it can cause students’ social lives and mental health to suffer; and, despite these negative impacts, students find work to be fulfilling. With these understandings, we propose ways that university programs, faculty, and academic staff can support working students by accommodating students' time and financial constraints.
Support for Working Students:
Understanding the Impacts of Employment on Students’ Lives

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 74% of part-time and 40% of full-time undergraduate students in the United States were employed in 2020. At colleges and universities with a high proportion of commuting students, the percentage of working students is likely higher (Jacoby, 2020). Students work for a variety of reasons, including to meet financial needs like paying tuition and rent, to gain experience related to career goals, and to earn spending money (Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Given the high proportion of students who work, there is a substantial body of scholarship documenting how working affects students’ academic performance (Remenick & Bergman, 2021; Riggert et al., 2006). However, there is little research on the impacts of this work on other aspects of students’ lives. In this paper we investigate the broader impacts of work related to students’ financial, emotional, and social wellbeing. We ask: What are the impacts of student employment beyond academic performance?

Much of the research of the last two decades examines the impact of work on academic outcomes, primarily measured by student grades, GPA, and degree completion. There is general consensus that when studying student outcomes, it is more important to understand the intensity of student work, measured by the number of working hours per week, as opposed to whether a student works or not (Shirley 2021). While some have found no relationship between the number of working hours and grades or GPA (Lang 2012; Nonis & Hudson 2006), most identify a threshold of approximately 15-20 hours of work per week as the boundary between work as beneficial or harmful to academic outcomes. Dundes and Marx (2006) found that for students surveyed at a selective four-year liberal arts college, working 10-19 hours at an off-campus job improved student grades and the number of hours they studied compared to all other students,
SUPPORT FOR WORKING STUDENTS

including those who did not work at all. The need to balance school and work allowed these
students to develop skills related to time management, organization, and developing routines
(Dundes & Marx, 2006). On the other hand, Logan et al. (2016) found that working over 20
hours a week at off-campus jobs decreased GPAs for students surveyed at a large Midwestern
public university. For urban commuting students, working over 30 hours per week had a
significantly negative effect on GPA (Torres et al., 2010). While scholars disagree on the exact
number of hours per week, there is general agreement that working approximately 15-20 hours
per week has positive effects on grades, GPA, and degree completion, while working more can
have negative effects (Carnavale & Smith, 2018; Dundes & Marx, 2006; Shirley, 2021).

Aside from the metrics of grades, GPA, and degree completion, work can affect students’
abilities to engage in academically enriching practices. These include devoting time to
assignments and studying; making connections with classmates and faculty; and participating in
activities such as attending talks or participating in research. Again, the intensity of work
matters: students with heavy work schedules of over 20 or 30 hours per week are less likely to
realize these academic benefits (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Furr & Elling, 2000). For these working
studies, there is a zero-sum relationship between work and academic efficacy (Galbraith &
Merrill, 2012). However, for students working fewer than 20 or 30 hours per week, there are
more opportunities to participate in positive academic experiences. For example, Zilvinskis and
McCormick (2019) found that students working fewer than 30 hours per week, at both on- and
off-campus jobs, reported higher levels of participation than non-working students in the
university’s high-impact practices of service learning and research with faculty. They suggest
that this participation may be because working students are more cognizant of their limited time
and are therefore more likely to seek out valuable educational opportunities in the time they do have.

Some argue that on-campus work provides more academic benefits for students than off-campus work. Students are more likely to form connections with faculty mentors and other students; they can more easily find employment that gives them relevant experience for their majors or career goals; and on-campus jobs tend to be more accommodating of students’ course schedules and can better support integration of student work and academics (Furr & Elling, 2000; Halper et al., 2020; Lang, 2012; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). In semi-structured interviews with first-generation Latinx students at a selective four-year university, Nuñez and Sansone (2016) found that students who mostly worked in on-campus jobs “that were meaningful, flexible, and not overly conflicting with other demands of college life” had generally positive perceptions of work. Beyond monetary gain, they felt they developed skills and community, and they found work to be satisfying. Cheng and Alcántara (2007) had similar findings based on focus groups with working students in a private residential college within a large urban university. The students, who worked mostly on campus, enjoyed working while going to school and believed working to be beneficial both economically and experientially. They believed their work helped shape their academic interests and career choices, and they reported that work helped them develop good time management skills and self-confidence.

While the existing scholarship generally concludes that working on campus is best for students’ academic experience, it fails to consider that off-campus work can offer important benefits for students beyond academics. For example, in a survey of off-campus student workers in the UK, who worked an average of 13 hours per week, Robotham (2012) found that even though fewer than 1% of students held jobs related to their studies or intended career,
approximately seventy percent of students reported that work “improved my ability to deal with other people,” “improved my communication skills,” and “increased my self-confidence.” These students working off-campus found personal growth through work, and they perceived more positive than negative impacts of work. We build on these findings about personal fulfillment and also address the financial impacts that students perceive from both on and off-campus work.

Whether employment is found on or off campus, work may affect students' social lives and mental health, though more research is needed to understand these relationships. There is evidence that working students have less time for socializing outside of work and are therefore less likely to form social connections at school or participate in campus activities (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Furr & Elling, 2000; Lang, 2012). However, there is little research about the social connections that working students have in their workplaces or in their home communities. There is also evidence of high reported levels of stress and burnout among full-time students who work, even those working in the under 20 hours per week range (Choo et al., 2021; Dundes & Marx, 2006; Galbraith & Merrill, 2012; Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Robotham, 2012). However, high levels of stress are not unique to working students, and some research shows that working students are not any more stressed than their non-working peers (Curtis, 2007). Our study begins to flesh out the picture of social lives and stress for working students. Given the scholarly consensus that academic outcomes are influenced by work intensity—the number of hours per week that a student works—we also evaluate how these nonacademic impacts of work are affected by work intensity.

Whereas much of the existing scholarship views working students only through an academic lens, we recognize that working students are full individuals for whom academics are just one aspect of their lives. We therefore seek to understand the positive and negative impacts
of work beyond academics. In particular, we focus on the financial, mental health, and social impacts of work. To best support working students, we argue that it is imperative to recognize them as full individuals, which requires understanding how work can benefit or harm students in all parts of their lives.

Methods

This study took place within an honors program at an urban, public, research university in the Pacific Northwest with a majority commuter student population. The program attracts students who are interested in a research- and writing-intensive undergraduate curriculum with a core faculty and a cohort of peers. Approximately three out of four students in the program currently work (defined as paid work of any kind). In addition, approximately one third are first-generation students (defined as being of the first generation in their families to attend college), and one third are students of color (defined as not non-Hispanic white, and including multiracial students). About a third of the students transferred to the program partway through their undergraduate degree, most often from a local community college. Students’ ages in the program range from 18 to mid-50s. In general, students in this program come from a wide range of personal and educational backgrounds.

This study of working students’ experiences was part of a larger study to identify ways to support working students, first-generation students, students of color, and transfer students within the honors program. We took two primary methodological approaches: 1) the research was driven by student researchers at all stages, and 2) the study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Student-Driven Research
While undergraduate students have been involved in the collection of quantitative data (Dundes & Marx, 2006) and graduate students have been involved in qualitatively studying the experiences of undergraduate students (Gibbons et al., 2019), there are no existing studies of working undergraduate students in which the research is driven by working undergraduate students themselves. Because this was a study about students, we felt it was important that students have a leading voice in the research process. While [Author 1], the Principal Investigator, facilitated the research process and provided mentorship, the student researchers were actively involved at all stages of the research, from identifying our research questions and reading relevant scholarly literature, to designing the survey and focus groups, to collecting and analyzing data. We also shared duties involved with writing results and identifying outlets for publication.

Three of the four researchers—[Authors 2, 3, and 4]—were sophomore undergraduate students at the time of research. Between the three of them, they brought their perspectives as working students, first-generation students, and students of color to the project, giving more insight into the experiences of the students we were studying. Prior to this research, they had each worked from one to three off-campus jobs at a time while being full-time students. Because of this, they understood the barriers that working students may face and wanted this project to positively impact other students. As “insiders” with the group we were studying (Dowling, 2016), the student researchers had a better understanding of what was important to their peers, knew what kinds of questions were most relevant to ask, and could intuit when a preliminary finding did not seem right. They also had a strong rapport with other students when recruiting for the study and conducting the focus groups. Whereas a professor conducting a focus group with students may have introduced uneven or potentially exploitative power relations in which
participants may have held back or filtered their responses (Dowling, 2016), focus group participants displayed trust and willingness to share their opinions and experiences with student researchers, knowing that the researchers were in a very similar position to them. We feel strongly that having student researchers integral to research design, data collection, and data analysis provides more credibility to the findings.

It is important to note how we were able to make this work. As the scholarly literature and our own results show, working students often have less time and little financial flexibility to participate in academically enriching experiences outside of coursework. To make this research experience a possibility, all three students received a scholarship and course credit for both of the two terms we worked together. This compensation allowed the students to leave or pause off-campus jobs; two of the students were able to temporarily stop off-campus work altogether while one was able to cut back from three jobs to one. In addition, all three students had been recruited to design this study together after they had taken a research methods course with [the PI] in which they had indicated their interest in research about student support. As a result, the students were well-versed in the research process and ready to dive in.

**Mixed Methods: Survey and Focus Groups**

Much of the research that evaluates the impacts of student work uses either qualitative methods (Cheng & Alcantara, 2007; Nunez & Sanshine, 2016) or quantitative methods (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Galbraith & Merrill, 2012; Halper et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2016; Robotham, 2011; Shirley, 2021; Zilvinski & McCormick, 2019). Unlike previous studies, this research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. We designed and conducted a large-scale survey to understand patterns in student employment related to location, intensity, and reason for work across different demographic variables. We also conducted small focus groups to provide
an in-depth understanding of working students’ personal experiences. We believe the quantitative data from the survey and the qualitative data from the focus groups provide more nuanced understandings of the other. The mixed-method approach is essential for being able to broadly generalize about the experiential impacts of student employment.

**Research Design**

The survey was designed to understand large patterns in the experiences of all students enrolled in the honors program. The student researchers created the initial set of survey questions. Then, with the PI, we had extensive discussions about wording, order, and formatting of questions (Kanazawa, 2018). The PI then formatted the questions into the online platform Qualtrics, which creates a survey that can be taken in either desktop or mobile format. Once the survey was formatted, it went through two rounds of feedback. First, the student researchers tested the survey, taking it from their own perspectives as students. Then, the three student researchers piloted the survey with two peers each. The PI also piloted the survey with the director of the honors program, the program advisor, and one other faculty member. With feedback from these nine individuals, we finalized the survey.

The final survey included sections about students’ demographics, their academic experience, their community experience, their emotional wellbeing, and their suggestions for improvement. In addition, it had sections specific to students who answered initial questions indicating they were working, first-generation, and/or transfer students. Questions for working students included how many jobs a student held that term; how many hours per week, on average, they spent at work; whether, in an average week, they spent more or equal time on school or work; where they worked, including on campus, off campus, or both; whether they believed at least one of their jobs was related to their career goals; their main reasons for
working; and how much they felt work interfered with their ability to focus on school. The survey consisted of a mix of multiple choice, ranking, select all that apply, scale, and short answer questions. It was designed to take ten to fifteen minutes to complete, depending on how many survey sections were applicable to any given student.

The focus groups were designed to dive deep into the experiences of students who identified with specific subgroups: working students, first-generation students, students of color, and transfer students. While this particular study draws data from the focus groups with working students, the design of all focus groups followed the same process. First, the student researchers designed semi-structured focus group guides in preparation for hour-long conversations with four to six students. As with the survey questions, the PI provided feedback on the topics and questions, and we had discussions as a group about order, wording, and formatting. The main topics planned for discussion were students’ work experiences as well as their stressors and social experiences. With semi-structured focus groups, it is important to allow participants to guide the conversation based on what areas of consensus or disagreement occur; the guides were meant to provide structure for the focus groups but not to dictate the conversations (Cameron, 2016). The focus groups themselves were designed to last no more than one hour, and could be conducted in person or remotely, using the online platform Zoom.

**Recruitment and Data Collection**

Recruitment and data collection for the survey and focus groups happened simultaneously over three weeks in the middle of the spring quarter of 2022. Recruitment for the survey happened in two primary ways. First, all of the faculty teaching in the honors program were asked to post an announcement with the link to the survey on their course Canvas pages and make an announcement in class. They were also asked to provide time in class for students
to take the survey, but it is unclear how many provided this time. Second, the survey announcement and link were emailed to all students enrolled in the honors program four times over the three weeks—three times in the weekly newsletter and once as a stand-alone email. Students who took the survey were eligible to win one of six 25-dollar Amazon gift cards, and this incentive was prominent in all recruitment for the survey. The survey was open for a little over three weeks. Of the 731 students enrolled in the honors program in the 2021-22 academic year, 268 took the survey. After removing 53 incomplete surveys as well as one from a student who had not yet begun in the program, we were left with 214 complete surveys by current students, a response rate of 29.3%.

Recruitment for the focus groups happened in two primary ways. The majority of participants signed up via a question in the survey that asked them to indicate their willingness to participate in a focus group. In addition, the student researchers attended the classes of five different honors professors at which they presented the project and recorded volunteers on a sign-up sheet. All students who participated in a focus group received a five-dollar Starbucks gift card, and this incentive was prominent in all recruitment for the focus groups. 68 individual students volunteered to participate in a focus group, with many students signing up for more than one. Of those, 45 were interested in participating in a focus group specifically about the experiences of working students. The student researchers followed up with volunteers via an email that included a Google form where they could select what times they were available and their preference for a Zoom or in-person meeting. The student researchers used spreadsheets to record student availability and coordinate the groups. Ultimately, only nine students were available to participate in two different groups—one with five students and one with four. Given working students’ lack of schedule flexibility, it was not surprising that it was difficult to
coordinate many working students to meet at the same time. Despite the smaller number of participants, the students represented a wide range of work experiences (see Table 1).

The student researchers conducted the focus groups alone, without the PI present. As mentioned, this was an intentional decision to allow students to develop rapport and trust with each other. Two student researchers facilitated each focus group, with one acting primarily as notetaker. Prior to the start of the discussion, it was made clear to the participants that the goal of the focus group was to hear their thoughts on the topic. The guide was not in ultimate control of the conversation, but the participants were. Both focus groups for working students took place in an empty classroom on the school’s campus, with one lasting 30 minutes and the other lasting 50 minutes. They were recorded with audio recorders and transcribed by the student researchers, with the participants’ consent. Students are identified in the transcripts and this paper by their initials to protect their identities.

Table 1

*Focus Group Participants and Student Researchers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Participant</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Current job</th>
<th>Secondary/Previous job</th>
<th>On/Off campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LM (he/him)</td>
<td>Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>Grocery delivery preparation at warehouse</td>
<td></td>
<td>Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP (he/him)</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>Food service at brewery</td>
<td>Dominos</td>
<td>Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JA (she/her)</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Honors program office aide</td>
<td>Home Depot garden department</td>
<td>On/Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NF (she/her)</td>
<td>Math and Data Science</td>
<td>Math center tutor</td>
<td>Safeway grocery store</td>
<td>Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Participant</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Current job</td>
<td>Secondary/Previous Job</td>
<td>On/Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL (he/him)</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Contracted film creator</td>
<td></td>
<td>Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD (she/her)</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Computational biology research lab</td>
<td></td>
<td>On campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD (he/him)</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Healthcare nonprofit</td>
<td>Remote assistant to medical doctor</td>
<td>Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS (he/him)</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Campus recreation office</td>
<td></td>
<td>On campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AG (he/him)</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Campus wood and metal shop</td>
<td>Assistant for student advisor</td>
<td>On campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT (she/her)</td>
<td>Speech and Hearing Sciences</td>
<td>Student researcher</td>
<td>Restaurant manager, Retail, Preschool teacher</td>
<td>On/Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM (she/her)</td>
<td>Public Health Studies</td>
<td>Student researcher</td>
<td>Pottery Barn home goods store, Preschool teacher</td>
<td>On/Off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER (she/her)</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Student researcher</td>
<td>Grocery store</td>
<td>On/Off campus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Due to the mix of both quantitative and qualitative data collection, we performed a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis from survey data was performed by looking at summary statistics, using cross tabulation to identify relationships between variables, and performing the chi-square test to determine statistical significance between variables. We also used descriptive statistics to explain trends within our specific dataset. To identify the most relevant findings, we used a collaborative process in which we first brainstormed big questions we wanted to ask of the data, then split these questions up among the researchers based on
interest. Then we individually created graphs and tables, pulling data from Qualtrics into Google Sheets to visually present the data in clear ways. When we had our regular meetings, we presented these preliminary findings to each other in short presentations and discussed which trends seemed most salient. In many cases, we revised the visualizations with different or modified data inputs, and met and discussed again. Because we were conducting qualitative analysis simultaneously, we continually came back to ask more questions of the quantitative data as we coded our focus group transcripts and short-answer survey questions. This iterative process allowed each of the researchers to weigh in on all parts of the quantitative analysis.

For the qualitative analysis of data from focus groups and short-answer survey questions, we used manual, open coding followed by focused coding to create codes based on our datasets (Bailey, 2007). Because the student researchers had conducted and transcribed the focus groups, thus being most familiar with the qualitative data, they also led the coding process. We used the comments feature in shared Google Docs to create and refine codes based on common themes in the transcripts and collected short-answer questions. As these common themes became clearer, we discussed them as a team, recategorized and organized them, and returned to the data to validate them with first-hand accounts from participants. As mentioned, we conducted qualitative and quantitative analysis simultaneously, so we paid special attention to findings that aligned with findings from the quantitative analysis.

**Study Limitations**

It is essential to acknowledge that this study took place two years into the Covid-19 pandemic. This likely affected why students worked and the intensity of their work. For example, the students sampled for this study may have been more likely to work because their families were struggling financially during the pandemic. They may also have worked more
because it provided an organized activity at a time when other options for routine and socializing were less available. The pandemic also likely affected where students worked. For students who started their jobs during a time when classes were remote and campus services were temporarily closed, off-campus employment could have been more desirable or accessible than on-campus work. In addition, because of the pandemic, most participating students had experienced one to two years of college fully or partially online. They had few opportunities to connect with classmates aside from scheduled Zoom classes and events. It is likely that social isolation contributed to students’ mental health and social lives, regardless of whether they worked or not.

As the immediate impacts of the pandemic recede and new trends in student employment and engagement emerge, future research is needed. For instance, in this study, we did not distinguish between remote and in-person work or between social and individual work. Future research should take into account how these factors influence working students’ mental health and social lives.

This study has other limitations. The context of an urban commuter school means that students in this sample had many off-campus employment options that are often more convenient when located closer to home than to campus. In addition, our sample was made up of only honors students, a group of academically motivated students. It is possible that this group of students as a whole feels more academic pressure than other students, contributing to compounding stress factors related to work and school. Finally, students in this study were enrolled in a program and a university in which they are in the majority as working students. Aside from the other challenges they face, they did not face stigma as working students and most felt open about discussing their employment. Future research about the non-academic impacts of
student employment should include other settings, including rural and residential colleges as well as schools with a wider range of students who do and do not work.

**Findings**

76.2% of all students in our sample hold at least one job. Students work for a variety of reasons, but when asked to identify their three main reasons for working, students across all demographic groups selected the same three: to pay for rent and other living expenses (69.3%), to have extra money to spend or save (66.3%), and to pay for school (61.3%). In other words, the primary motivator for working students in our sample is earning money for personal needs. The following exchange among focus group participants about why they work supports this point:

EP: There’s obviously the financial benefit, that’s like, I’d say like 95% of it for me…

LM: For me it’s just also 95% for the money…

JA: For me, well obviously like everybody else, [the] financial [benefit] is good.

While the quantitative and qualitative data show that financial necessity is students’ main motivator, the qualitative data also show that students work for personal connections and interest. EL, a contracted film creator, summarized these overlapping goals: “I work to get the experience with what I do for the film work. So, it's like partly for building [my] resume … and to just be able to buy groceries.”

The demographic profile of working students is very similar to the profile of non-working students; there are no significant differences in first-generation or transfer status, race, or age (see Table 2). The majority of working students in our sample work off campus: 72.3% work off campus, including virtual work, while 41.7% work on campus, including virtual work (some students hold on- and off-campus jobs simultaneously). 68.7% of students work 20 hours or less per week, while 31.2% work over 20 hours per week. The mode for all students is
working 16-20 hours per week, with 25.2% of students working in this range. When broken down by demographics, there is no statistically significant difference in terms of who works up to or over 20 hours per week. However, in general, those working more hours are more likely to work off campus (see Figure 1). 43.6% of students spend more time on school each week, 29.5% spend about the same time on school and work, and 27.0% spend more time on work.

Table 2

Demographics of Working and Non-Working Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variable</th>
<th>Total (n=214)</th>
<th>Working Students (n=163)</th>
<th>Non-working Students (n=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% First-generation students</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Students of color</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Transfer students</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 18-20</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 21-23</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 24-26</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 27-29</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 30+</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1

*Off-Campus and On-Campus Work in Relation to Hours Worked Per Week*

Understanding the who, where, when, and why of student work only tells one part of the story. This gives little insight about the impact of this work on students’ lives. We now turn to the impacts of work on student’s lives beyond academic performance. We offer four key findings:

1. Work limits flexibility in students’ schedules, leaving them vulnerable in emergencies
2. Working students must make difficult financial calculations
3. Stress from time and financial constraints can cause students’ social lives and mental health to suffer
4. Despite negative impacts, students find work to be fulfilling

**Work Limits Flexibility in Students’ Schedules, Leaving Them Vulnerable in Emergencies**

All students, regardless of whether they work or not, feel a strain on their time. Both working and non-working students identified “Not enough time to do everything I need to do” as one of their top two stressors, from a list of ten options (see Table 3). In addition, when asked to
select from a list of honors program events they had participated in, the most common response from both working students (41.7%) and non-working students (45.1%) was “None of the above; I’m interested but my schedule doesn’t allow it.” Far fewer working students (16.6%) and non-working students (15.7%) replied “None of the above; I’m not interested,” indicating that students want to attend social and professional development events, but feel they are too busy. As working student AD put it, “[I’m hearing] you talking about, ‘I’m going to take this time to go to that workshop,’ and in my mind, I’m like ‘I don’t have time for that.’”

While both working and non-working students are busy, working students are more likely to experience a rigid schedule. They must plan their work and school schedules around each other. NF, who works at a math tutoring center, explained, “I actually got asked by my job to plan my class schedule around being able to work, because they’re only open from 3 to 7 every day.” In addition to set times they must be in class or at work, those who work off campus spend time commuting by car or public transit. As EP, who works at a brewery, noted, “My commute is like an hour both ways…I take the bus.” LM, who works at a grocery packaging warehouse, explained, “I have to really strategize about my shifts, around when I’m able to catch a bus there.” NF explained that she had only three minutes to get between her last class and the bus for her commute to work. When she found herself on crutches, her constrained schedule added extra stress: “That was like the worst experience ever: having to sprint to the bus on crutches, just to make it to work on time.”

Other working students agreed that their schedules left little room to deal with emergencies. AG explained that he needed to replace a part on his car, but because of his tight schedule he doubted he would be able to get the task done until the following week, increasing the risk of further damage to his car. He explained, “the stilted way to say it would be it [work]
increases precarity… having more free time, I think everyone would agree, gives you potentially the ability to deal with emergencies a little bit better.” JD also felt that he was in a precarious position: “I feel relatively comfortable with the balance I’ve got, but I also feel like it's right up against that line and there's… if anything goes wrong, that’s going to suck.”

**Working Students Must Make Difficult Financial Calculations**

Students work primarily to make money, but the need to work brings additional financial challenges. For example, students must weigh the financial costs and benefits of working on or off campus. There are proven academic, social, and professional benefits of working on campus, and students working on campus do not need to factor in commuting. As JA explained of her work in the honors program office, “obviously, they prioritize my school and, also, I’m allowed to study at work… which is a major perk of a student job.” Yet participants found they could make more money elsewhere. AG, who works on campus in a wood and metal shop, explained:

> Having on-campus work and having an on-campus work that more or less [aligns] with your academic schedule can be pretty incredible if you gotta work. However, [the university’s] on-campus wages are notably worse than Taco Bell. They’re not great. So yeah, it's just the reality.

For many students, the draw of higher wages elsewhere makes off-campus work worth it, even with commuting costs in time and money. AG noted, “There's a lot of working students who actually need personal transportation because of the nature of their work, and oh my god does it cost a lot to park here.”

For students who do work on campus, some express dismay at the university bureaucracy around student employment and aid. The student researchers for this project, for example, found themselves in the confounding position of nearly having to turn down this on-campus paid
opportunity because the scholarship would interfere with other scholarships or financial aid they already received. Students also found that on-campus work also had less predictable payments than off-campus work. Depending on the type of on-campus work, payment could be a once-a-term deposit or tuition reduction, or it could be an hourly paycheck. Because their faculty supervisors were rarely the people paying them directly, students reported spending hours on the phone and in person trying to track down who to speak to regarding late or incorrect payments in their student accounts. Students were also confused about how to pay taxes on different forms of income. AD attempted to explain her stipend for on-campus work in a research lab: “So, it’s not hourly. So, they're like scholarships, I think technically. Well, in the summer it's hourly, so I had to report that on taxes, but then stipends… Wait, I don’t know.” Students did not feel they had support in navigating these financial situations.

One of the biggest financial stressors for students working both on and off campus is navigating financial aid and eligibility for different aid programs. Many found themselves striking a balance between working enough to pay for their personal needs and not working too much that they would become disqualified from need-based aid. AD explained her situation:

One of the things I struggle with in keeping this job, because I [have a state scholarship] and also have [a university scholarship], is like having to make enough money, but not so much that I disqualify for all these programs.

EP agreed, referring to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), “Yeah. Because they usually won’t give you money if you make too much.” JD raised additional financial worries about working enough but not too much:
What I worry about more with my working wages is my eligibility for [the state health plan] because I’m not earning enough to be booted off that just yet, but I'm close because they changed the rules during Covid. So, there is some stress around health insurance.

AG was making similar calculations. Because the university requires health insurance for students, AG calculated that it would save him money to work less and qualify for state insurance than to pay for university-sponsored insurance. For AG, the cost of health insurance would have made a difference in his choice to attend the university at all:

I was sort of lucky—“lucky”—to be on my own and unemployed/underemployed due to Covid, making myself newly eligible for [the state health plan] because I don't know that I would have chosen [this university] having to pay an extra [cost] a term.

Working students also navigate financial decisions with and without their families. EL described the stress of taking on debt: “my parents do not have money to put me through college, so we are on loans…. So, it's like this looming cloud of debt.” Participants discussed the challenge of not receiving the financial aid they needed because they had to report their parents’ income, even when they were not receiving financial assistance from their parents to pay for school. AD explained that at 24 she was relieved she had aged out of having to report her parents’ income on FAFSA, but that she was frustrated she had had to wait so long to receive the aid she needed: “I just hit the age limit where I didn't have to report my parents anymore. And it's like literally like five years too much. Like it's actually so, so bad that they don't make it like 18.” Navigating financial aid and scholarships was a major stressor for working students.

**Stress From Time and Financial Constraints can Cause Students’ Social Lives and Mental Health to Suffer**
Just as all students perceive a lack of time to do what they need to do, all students experience stress, regardless of whether they work or not. However, stressors change depending on how many hours a student works. Students who did not work at all or those working up to 20 hours per week reported “academic pressure from myself or my family to get good grades” as their top stressor. Other main stressors were “not enough time to do everything I need to do,” “concerns about society and politics,” “interpersonal dynamics with friends, partners, and family,” and “health challenges for myself or a loved one.” However, for students working more than 20 hours per week, academic pressure receded as a top stressor, replaced by “not enough time to do everything I need to do,” “financial pressure to provide for myself or my family,” and “responsibilities or interpersonal dynamics at work” (see Table 3). In other words, the more time and financial constraints a student faces—represented by the number of hours they work—the more likely they are to experience financial and work-related stress on top of academic pressure.

**Table 3**
*Top Three Stressors for Students by Work Intensity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Working (n=51)</th>
<th>0-5 Hours/Week (n=9)</th>
<th>6-10 Hours/Week (n=32)</th>
<th>11-15 Hours/Week (n=30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressor</strong></td>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
<td><strong>Stressor</strong></td>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic pressure</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>Academic pressure</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>Not enough time</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and politics</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>Interpersonal dynamics</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Support for Working Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Hours/Week</th>
<th>Academic Pressure</th>
<th>Dynamic at Work</th>
<th>Financial Pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-20 Hours/Week (n=41)</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 Hours/Week (n=20)</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 Hours/Week (n=16)</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31+ Hours/Week (n=15)</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Students were asked to select three main stressors from a list of ten options: academic pressure from myself or my family to get good grades; financial pressure to provide for myself or my family; interpersonal dynamics with family, partners, or friends; responsibilities or interpersonal dynamics at work; health challenges for myself or a loved one; caregiving responsibilities; concerns about society and politics; not enough time to do everything I need to do; lack of social support system; other.

These stressors have significant effects on students’ personal relationships. EL, a contracted film creator, explained, “[working] was tough on relationships because it’d just be like ‘do you want to go to the food carts?’ And I was like, ‘are you crazy? That's like 2 hours. That’s potential editing time. Like, there's no way.’” AD had a similar experience of feeling the need to put work ahead of personal relationships: “my mom would call and I’m like, ‘I'm sorry, I have to push dinner back again’ and I’m in the lab still.” Working students also felt they missed out on campus-oriented social events and opportunities to meet other students. NF sadly reported:
I’ve had to quit several clubs that I was a part of because I can’t attend them, and get my work done, and go to work. And there are days where my friends all hang out, because none of them have jobs, or they all live on campus. And I have to be like, ‘well, sorry guys! I can’t make it!’

She continued, “it kind of sucks when, y’know, everyone is hanging out or there’s like a big event, and you’re like, ‘I really want to go, but I have to go work.’” Students working in customer service explained that even when they did have time to socialize, they were socially exhausted from interacting with customers.

Working students also believed that the constraints on their time and the urgency of their financial need contributed to a decline in their mental health. Several students found that when confronted with heavy work and school loads, they repeatedly pushed themselves to a breaking point, without time for breaks or sleep. EL reflected:

The lack of flexibility of time for me…it was bad for school and it was bad for relationships. I get in a bad situation—where I have to do work stuff, I really prioritize it. So I would just like tunnel vision and I was not taking—'it's time management skills—I was not taking breaks.

Eliciting commiserating laughter from the group, NF explained:

Usually when it [the stress] explodes, it’s like 19 million assignments at once, and then I procrastinate and do them all in one night, and freak out and cry at least once, maybe twice. And then, the next day I’m like, ‘wow! That wasn’t that bad.’

AD was most concise about the effects on her health: “I just like push through and then finals is over and then I get really sick.” In AD’s case, the stress affected her physical health as well. For
these students, the experience of pushing themselves to their limits was not unusual but rather a routine part of being a working student.

Students felt that their time and financial constraints also contributed to high levels of anxiety. NF explained that when she was at work, it was hard not to think about all the school work she had to do:

It’s like, I have to go do this thing [work]. And I’m going to have to be thinking about this thing, and present during this thing, when I have like, a paper to write, and I’ve got this math homework to do, and I’ve got this other thing I need to do, and it just, like, adds up.

EP agreed that work is “just more hours in the day I don’t have to do classwork.” AD also said that work and school consumed her thoughts and kept her from sleeping: “Well, I wake up at 6:00 AM and can’t go back to sleep. Because I’m like, I have to start working right now.”

Students felt split allegiances and lack of understanding from both work and school about their priorities. EP noted:

Teachers and the school system itself wants you to be totally dedicated to your studies, but it’s like — you can't when you’re working, because you have to split your life up, right? … And sometimes, your job is not understanding. Like my job, the restaurant industry is like notorious for being like, “well you can stay extra hours and help us out, and you should be dedicated to this restaurant.”

While working students experience elevated levels of stress and anxiety, it is also true that non-working students do as well. As with social connections at school, all surveyed students were asked to self-report the state of their mental health, and there was no statistically significant difference between the reported mental health of working and non-working students. On a scale
of one to five, with one being very poor and five being excellent, working students averaged 2.63 while non-working students averaged 2.75. That said, the stressors working students feel most acutely concern finances and responsibilities at work, rather than academic pressure. In other words, on top of feeling academic pressure, working students have additional stressors that extend well beyond the academic realm into parts of their lives that concern basic needs for housing and food. EP summed up these stressors well:

Last term, that’s when I was still working like 30-35 hours, and yeah, I like basically failed all my classes and took an incomplete. And it was like a mess. So that’s why I’m downscaling this term. Um, but then you’re forced into this like horrible position where it’s like, do you want to scale down on your hours and get good grades and keep your scholarships and stay in school? Or do you want to work and have money for enough food? Y’know? It sucks.

NF similarly summed up her reasons for working, “I ran out of money for rent, like–or I’m going to run out of money for rent–so I started to get a job so I can, y’know, continue to live.”

Despite Negative Impacts, Students Find Work to be Personally Fulfilling

Even though students feel heightened stress from the time and financial challenges of working, they also find work to be personally fulfilling. Many students have personal interest in the work they do and they enjoy learning life and professional skills. NF, a math major who works in a math tutoring center, reflected, “It’s really fun and I have learned so many ways to do math so quickly.” NF also felt that work was helping her build professional connections, as many of her colleagues were graduate students and professors. EP, who works in food service at a brewery, was happy that through work he had learned how to cook for himself; and EL found that work prepared him for his future career: “It's just like learning how to do my job better…”
more industry experience.” JD, who returned to school after working for several years, felt glad to be able to work and go to school simultaneously: “I feel like they definitely form one another and the whole experience feels richer for it.”

Students also found that, depending on the type of job, work itself could be de-stressor. Many found that the daily structure of work helped with time management, which could reduce stress. Those doing physical work especially found they could clear their minds. AG, who works in a wood and metal shop on campus, explained:

Not that work should normally be treated as like [a] stand in for having a hobby… But it is nice. You know, it's like, for instance, with the foundry, there's something very soothing about lighting huge amounts of metal on fire and pouring liquid metal. That’s comforting.

LM, who works at a warehouse preparing groceries, expressed that work provided a welcome counterpoint to a sedentary school life:

It’s a very physical job, it’s a lot of lifting heavy products and putting them on the shelf, and then also walking around and filling grocery bags… I would hate to do something like that full time because it would be exhausting, but when otherwise you spend [time] sitting around doing classwork, it’s actually kind of nice having a more physical job and getting paid to move around.

JA, who used to work at Home Depot, agreed: “I would have to load brick and mulch and stuff into customers' cars. And I would treat it like a workout too.”

While working students worry about finances and have to make difficult financial calculations, they also find that making money and achieving financial independence is rewarding. LM explained:
I want to be able to have a more consistent source of income, that I’m able to control myself, and don’t need to depend on someone else for… I like that it just gives me more resources for being able to get through school and everything, than if I were relying entirely on family and savings and scholarships.

Students found their stress relieved by bringing in a paycheck. AG noted, “Having a little bit of money is a [de-stressor],” to which HS responded, “I think I agree that, like, having money is kind of a good antidote to the stress aspect.”

Finally, even though students felt that work can strain relationships, it would be wrong to assume that working students are at a social disadvantage compared to their non-working peers. 46.6% of working students compared to 31.4% of non-working students said they had made friends in the honors program as opposed to just acquaintances or no friends. This may be because non-working students have community or family responsibilities that aren’t employment, or they may find more school-related friends through extracurriculars or campus programs outside of the honors program. It may also be that working students are more deliberate about making connections in the limited time they have with classmates. It is important to note though that students at commuter schools, regardless of their work status, tend to have social networks outside of school. JA explained, “I just chalk it up to being a commuter school…I have friends from childhood still, and I have two older sisters I’m close with.”

Whether working students truly have more school friends or not, work further enriches many students’ social lives because it provides an additional outlet for making connections. Students highly value their relationships at work. This is particularly the case for those who had been working students during the stay-at-home phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (the study took place in spring 2022). For students working off campus, almost all in service-sector jobs that
would have been considered “essential work,” work was one of the only places where they saw people outside of their households. The following conversation highlights how important work social connections were for students:

JA: School was completely online, I lived with my parents, my parents are both immunocompromised. So, I was very strict about covid stuff, and work [at Home Depot] was like literally the only place I saw people. So, the social aspect was huge last year for me.

EP: I was the same way. I worked at Domino’s last year, and like, that crew of people working there, that was the only people I interacted with. I was really close with them during the pandemic.

IT: [NF], you’re nodding, are you having – did you have a similar experience?

NF: Yeah, I had a – when I worked at Safeway before this. My family was super strict, we didn’t really go out anywhere. So, when I got to work there, I got to see a lot of people that I didn’t get to see at all before then.

Aside from the context of the pandemic, many students expressed that they had close friendships with their coworkers. AD reflected on her colleagues in the research lab, “I feel like I get a sense of community,” and AG agreed, “It's good to have another avenue for community.”

**Implications of Findings and Recommendations**

There are known academic impacts of student employment, but this study recognizes that other impacts of work can be just as—if not more—important for students. Financial need is the main reason students work. Working students, especially those working more than 20 hours per week, work to pay for rent and living expenses, to have money to spend or save, and to pay for school. Despite the academic and social benefits of on-campus work (Furr & Elling, 2000; Halper et al., 2020; Lang, 2012; Remenick & Bergman, 2021), which students recognize, many
choose to work off campus where pay is better and easier to navigate. Financial assistance is the biggest support working students need. When asked to select from a list of options that would improve their college experience, 77.9% of working students selected “more financial support (scholarships, hourly positions, reduced fees).” In response to the short-answer question “Do you have suggestions for how the [honors program] could better support working students specifically?” 18 of the 46 written responses were direct requests for more scholarships and reduced fees. This was a major topic in the focus group discussions as well. As EL said, “Make it more affordable…. It’s like, can you support me by helping me pay my bills? Because it's just tough, because it's like events aren't really going to do that.”

Wherever possible, universities and individual programs should provide financial assistance, including better-paying on-campus jobs. As Perna and Odle (2020) note, this may require public policy changes that appropriate more resources to institutions so that they can reduce tuition and distribute more aid. Ideally universities should be able to provide enough financial assistance so that students can realistically work on campus if they want to and do not need to work more than 20 hours per week. As other scholars have shown, students who work more than 20 hours per week are more likely to suffer academically (Carnavale & Smith, 2018; Dundes & Marx, 2006; Logan et al., 2016; Shirley, 2021; Torres et al., 2010). Our research shows that those who work more than 20 hours per week are also more likely to devote their physical and emotional energy to work, as finances and work-related responsibilities and dynamics are their main causes of stress. This has cascading effects on their social lives and mental health.

While many students would gladly receive financial assistance so that they can cut back their work hours, the goal should not be to have students stop working altogether. Many working
students want to work and do not see work as a negative aspect of their lives. It can be a meaningful experience, whether because of professional development, personal fulfillment, exercise, or social benefits. Many are proud of the work they do. Universities, programs, faculty, and academic staff must recognize that work is an important part of students’ identities and not a deficit. Some students actually prefer to spend more time on work than school; school is a priority in their lives but not the main priority, and that should be acknowledged and respected.

The reality is that students will continue to work, and many will continue to work more than 20 hours per week. It is incumbent upon university faculty and academic staff to recognize this reality and the impacts it has on students’ lives, so that they can better support working students. Even professors simply acknowledging student workers alleviates stress for students. As EL said, “maybe a way to do that [alleviate stress] is like just pushing for faculty to be aware…for just like teachers to know that you're working.” Students appreciate when professors have policies that show they understand the multiple responsibilities students have and the time and financial constraints they face. These can be policies like providing flexible due dates and late options for assignments. Professors can provide time in class for group work, knowing that students will be unlikely to find times to meet outside of class. If appropriate for the course, they can offer flexible course delivery, which might be attend-anywhere options, recorded lectures, or remote participation for specific course components. Even if students don’t take advantage of these policies every term, they show students that professors understand their situations. As JA said, “I’ve never had to ask for an extension, but of plenty of people do, and I’ve seen professors I’ve had respond to it nicely, which is good.” Faculty can also assign open-access texts and direct students to less expensive course materials when they are necessary. Faculty and academic staff must also recognize that many students cannot do extracurricular activities for free, even when
they want to do them and understand the benefits. Students will be much more likely to participate in academic enrichment activities, leadership positions, or professional development if they include compensation.

There are ways for universities to support students financially, aside from direct aid. They can help ensure that earnings from student work do not count against financial aid for tuition (Perna & Odle, 2020). They can provide assistance to students navigating difficult financial decisions regarding financial aid, student loans, insurance eligibility, and taxes. These decisions cause students an enormous amount of stress because they are often making these calculations alone and the financial stakes are high. Having specific staff members who can help students make these decisions and have access to all of the aid for which they are eligible would alleviate working students’ stress and could even reduce the need to work. It would also empower students to feel more in control of their financial lives, something they value. Universities can also better educate faculty and academic staff who hire on-campus student workers about which types of scholarships are or are not compatible with other scholarships and forms of financial aid. This would help individual faculty and academic programs know how to write student workers into grants, budget requests, and other applications for funds.

**Conclusion**

School is a priority for working students, but it is just one part of their full lives. It is important that university programs, faculty, and academic staff recognize work as an important part of the majority of college students’ identities, as well as the pride and personal fulfillment many students find in their employment. While existing scholarship shows that work and work intensity affect academic performance, our research fills a gap in the scholarship by focusing on the non-academic impacts of work. We demonstrate that work also has financial, mental health,
and social impacts for students, which contribute to their overall wellbeing. It is imperative that those who wish to support students understand the time and financial constraints that working students face, as well as the emotional toll these can take. Only with this understanding can classroom policies and university services support these individuals as students, workers, and full human beings.
References


https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/learnandearn/#resources


https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/34.3.243


https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA297135943&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r
https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115622777


https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.81.3.151-159


https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2020.1777381


