



**Further Explorations on the Impact of Working
on the Undergraduate Experience**

by

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FURTHER EXPLORATIONS ON THE IMPACT OF WORKING ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Graduating seniors from the Class of 1997 were employed an average of five semesters during their undergraduate careers, and almost one-third held jobs for at least seven semesters.
- Seniors reported working, on average, 18 hours a week which is two and a half more hours per week than that which was reported from seniors at other institutions.
- GW seniors reported benefiting personally, socially, and financially from their employment. The most significant enhancement occurred in their personal growth and development: Three out of four seniors indicated it was enhanced. Paid employment helped prepare 70% of them for their post-college lives, and over half indicated that employment enhanced their undergraduate experiences, happiness, and their ability to finance their undergraduate education.
- While employment helped students financially and socially, it did have a damaging effect on the academic experience and education of some students. One-third indicated that their employment impeded the amount of course work they were able to complete, and one-third thought that working was detrimental to their grade point average.
- An exploration of the impact of work on students' academic experiences suggested that it is the number of hours worked, not the number of semesters employed, that had the most detrimental effect on students' grades. Students who worked 15 hours a week or less earned significantly higher grades than those who worked at least 25 hours a week.
- One-third of the seniors reported that their jobs somewhat or greatly impeded the amount of course work they completed. This suggests that employment may reduce the amount of time spent actively learning and mastering what was taught in the classroom.
- Another repercussion of student employment may be the failure of over-employed students to accumulate enough credits to graduate. The amount of course work students completed was highly correlated with their ability to graduate in a timely fashion.

- The extent to which GW's declining graduation rates can be attributed to student employment is, as yet, speculative. However, 10% of the seniors reported that their employment impeded their ability to graduate in a timely fashion. A comparison between this group (Impeded group) and those who indicated that their jobs had no effect (No Effect group) on their time-to-graduate showed that those in the Impeded group were employed, on average, two additional semesters; worked, on average, four hours more per week; and earned lower grades than those in the No Effect group. Moreover, the Impeded group averaged four semesters of 12 or less earned credit hours compared to only one semester for the No Effect group.
- The role of current and future debt on students' employment habits and ultimately on their educational attainment is uncertain. However, a comparison of the amount of college loans and personal (not parental) credit card debt between the two groups showed that those in the Impeded group borrowed larger sums of money to finance their education and incurred greater amounts of credit card debt compared to those in the No Effect group.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS ON THE IMPACT OF WORKING ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

A recent report, "Learning and Earning Outside the Classroom: An Updated Report of Undergraduate Involvement in Out-of-Class Experiences," summarized the extent of undergraduate involvement in paid employment, internships, cooperative education, and voluntary service. It was reported that during a typical semester, three out of four undergraduates were involved in an out-of-class experience, and three in ten were engaged in two or more activities. Of those involved, almost half held paying jobs, either at GW or off-campus, one in ten interned, and another one in ten engaged in voluntary service. During a typical week students spent a total of 54 to 59 hours attending classes, studying, and working, interning, or volunteering part- or half-time. Only 15 of these hours (14 hours for seniors) were devoted to studying.

While the report quantified the amount of time students spent in out-of-class experiences, it raised questions about the impact of working on the students' academic experiences. Are career goals or finances the primary motivation behind student employment? What educational benefits are gained from working part-time? What are the repercussions or consequences of jobs on graduation rates, course work completion, social lives, grades, and preparation for post-college lives? This report attempts to answer these questions by developing a better understanding of the impact of student employment on the undergraduate experience.

Method

An annual Graduating Senior Survey was distributed in May 1997 when students picked up their graduation regalia. A total of 903 seniors out of a possible 1,366 completed the survey, representing a 66% response rate.

Seniors were asked to indicate the number of semesters they had worked for pay and the average number of hours they had worked during a typical week. For those who worked, eight additional questions explored the perceived impact of employment on several areas of GW life: Amount of course work completed, grade point average, ability to graduate in a timely fashion, GW experiences, social activities, extracurricular involvement, happiness, personal growth and development, preparation for post-GW life, and ability to finance one's education. Financial position was further illuminated by asking students to indicate the total dollar amount of loans borrowed for their education and the amount of personal credit card debt they had accumulated.

For students who provided their social security numbers (65%), additional information was gathered concerning cumulative grade point averages, undergraduate admissions ratings, and number of credit hours earned per semester.

Results and Discussion

By the time of graduation, nine out of ten seniors from the Class of 1997 indicated they had worked for pay during at least one semester at GW. Typically, students were employed an average of five semesters¹ during their undergraduate careers, and almost one-third held jobs for at least seven semesters. Seniors reported working, on average, 18 hours a week which is two and a half more hours per week than that which was reported from students at other institutions.²

Table 1
Comparison of Number of Hours Worked Per Week

Institution	Mean	Median	Mode
GW	18.05	16.00	20.00
Other universities	15.42	13.00	10.00

While it is difficult to measure the educational value of employment, seniors reported benefiting personally, socially, and financially from these experiences. The most significant improvement occurred in their personal growth and development: Three out of four seniors indicated that it was enhanced. Paid employment helped prepare 70% of the seniors for their post-college lives, and over half indicated that employment enhanced their undergraduate experiences, happiness, and their ability to finance their undergraduate education. Moreover, as Table 2 indicates, the percentage of students benefiting from employment expanded as the number of semesters working increased

¹The median number of semesters employed was five, and the modal number was eight.

²Comparative data comes from a senior survey distributed by members of the Higher Education Data Sharing Group. Institutions which participated in the 1997 Senior Survey and were included in the comparison group are: Brandeis, Clark, Drexel, Tulane and Wake Forest Universities, Dartmouth College, and University of the Pacific.

Table 2. Percentage of seniors indicating enhancement by number of semesters employed.

Enhanced (greatly and somewhat):	Semesters				Total
	<u>0 - 2</u>	<u>3 - 4</u>	<u>5 - 6</u>	<u>7 - 8</u>	
Personal growth and development	64%	72%	84%	78%	75%
Preparation for post-college life	56%	70%	76%	76%	70%
Undergraduate experience	53%	59%	69%	64%	62%
Happiness	41%	50%	64%	61.5%	56%
Ability to finance education	37%	48%	62%	74%	58%
Social life	21%	33%	40%	39%	35%

Other analyses exploring the impact of number of semesters employed on students' level of satisfaction with their undergraduate education, the quality of their interaction with faculty, and their overall satisfaction with GW³ showed no effect, either positive or negative. Similarly, the number of semesters employed did not affect students' academic, social, and personal adaptation to college.⁴

While employment benefited many students financially and socially, it had a damaging effect on the academic experience and education of some students. One-third of the seniors indicated that their employment impeded the amount of course work they were able to complete, and one-third thought that working was detrimental to their grade point average.⁵ Moreover, as Table 3 indicates, the percentage reporting a harmful effect increased with the number of semesters employed.

³Number of semesters worked was not correlated with students' level of satisfaction with their undergraduate education, GW experience, or their interaction with faculty.

⁴The three subscales were adapted from Baker and Siryk's (1985) adjustment to college scale. The academic subscale asked students to evaluate their academic experience at GW; the social subscale included questions assessing students' involvement in extracurricular activities and their interpersonal relationships; and the personal-emotional subscale asked them to assess their level of stress and depression.

⁵ A t-test verified that students who claimed working negatively affected their grades had a lower grade point average than those who said working had not affected their grades.

Table 3. Percentage of seniors indicating impediments by number of semesters employed.

Impeded:	Semesters				Total
	0 - 2	3 - 4	5 - 6	7 - 8	
Amount of course work completed	26%	28%	34%	41%	33%
Involvement in extracurricular activities	28%	24%	36%	41%	34%
Grade point average	27%	32%	34%	43%	35%
Ability to graduate in four years	9%	6%	11%	12%	10%

Further exploration of the impact of work on students' academic experiences suggested that it is the number of hours worked, not the number of semesters employed, that has the most detrimental effect on students' grades. Analyses using students' cumulative grade point average,⁶ controlling for their entry level qualifications,⁷ showed that as work hours increased, grade point averages decreased. Students who worked 15 hours a week or less earned significantly higher grades than those who worked at least 25 hours a week.⁸

Another potentially harmful consequence of employment was that it could hamper the acquisition of subject matter knowledge and analytic skills introduced in class and learned through active engagement with the material or skill (i.e., through reading, studying, discussion, and writing). One-third of the seniors reported that their jobs somewhat or greatly impeded the amount of course work they completed, suggesting that employment reduced the amount of time spent actively learning and mastering what was taught in the classroom.

In light of GW's declining graduation rate,⁹ another repercussion of student employment may be the failure of over-employed students to accumulate enough credits to

⁶Students' cumulative grade point average from the Spring 1997 semester was used.

⁷Admissions Office ratings of entering students were used to determine entry-level qualifications. These ratings are based on high school rank and SAT scores.

⁸A significant one-way analysis of variance followed by a Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test indicated that the groups' grade point averages were significantly different.

⁹Only 59% of the freshmen who entered in 1993 graduated in four year compared to 64% of those who entered in 1986. Similarly, the six year graduation rate declined from a high of 73% of those entering in 1986 to 68% of those entering in 1991.

graduate. The amount of course work students completed is highly correlated with their ability to graduate in a timely fashion:¹⁰ As students spent less time on their studies, their ability to make satisfactory academic progress, measured by passing grades and the number of earned credit hours compared to attempted credit hours, was compromised. Alexander Astin, author of *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (1987), found that off-campus employment was negatively related to college persistence. Attrition increased as the number of hours students were employed off-campus increased.

The extent to which GW's declining graduation rates can be attributed to student employment is, as yet, speculative. However, 10% of the graduating seniors who completed the survey reported that their employment impeded their ability to graduate in a timely fashion.¹¹ A comparison between this group (Impeded) and a random sample of the seniors who said employment had no effect on their educational attainment (No Effect) illuminates some distinctions between the two groups.

As Table 4 indicates, those in the Impeded group were employed an additional semester,¹² worked, on average, four hours more;¹³ and earned lower grades¹⁴ than those in the No Effect group. Moreover, the Impeded group averaged four semesters of 12 or less earned credit hours compared to only one semester for the No Effect group.¹⁵ Although earning 12 credit hours a semester is considered full-time status, four year graduation is contingent upon earning 15 credits for eight semesters.

¹⁰A Pearson product-moment correlation produced an $r^2 = .39$, $p < .0001$.

¹¹As the survey was distributed a few days before the graduation ceremony, respondents were only those eligible to participate in the ceremony. Students who had entered in 1993 and who had not made satisfactory academic progress would not have completed the survey.

¹² $t(486) = 2.59$, $p < .01$.

¹³ $t(452) = 5.44$, $p < .0001$.

¹⁴ $t(55) = 5.15$, $p < .0001$.

¹⁵The modal number of semesters of 12 or less earned hours for the Impeded group is 6 compared to 0 for the No Effect group.

Table 4. Differences between seniors who thought employment impeded their educational attainment and those who indicated that it had no effect.

	<u>Impeded</u>	<u>No Effect</u>
Average number of semesters worked	5.78	4.96
Average number of hours worked per week	19.88	15.89
Average cumulative grade point average	2.80	3.20
Number of semesters earning less than 12 credits	3.65	0.95

An examination of the entry level qualifications of the two groups showed that students in the Impeded group were more likely to represent the “average” GW student, while those in the No Effect group were “above average” or “superior” candidates for admission. While nothing in the entry level qualifications of the Impeded group indicates that they would experience academic difficulty or fail to make satisfactory academic progress, those in the No Effect group who were superior candidates for admission were more likely to have been awarded a merit scholarship, thus reducing their tuition costs. As Table 5 indicates, over half (56%) of the No Effect group were awarded merit aid (averaging \$5,000) compared to only 13% of the Impeded group. This award may well have alleviated the need for the No Effect group to work long hours to help finance their education.

The role of current and future debt on students’ employment habits and ultimately on their educational attainment is uncertain. However, a comparison of the amount of college loans and personal (not parental) credit card debt between the two groups may provide insight into why one group worked longer hours. As Table 5 indicates, a higher percentage of the Impeded group compared to the No Effects group borrowed a larger sum of money to finance their education. Similarly, almost twice as many in the Impeded group had incurred larger amounts of credit card debt compared to those in the No Effect group. The extent to which students were using their credit cards for the purchase of books and school supplies or for personal entertainment is unknown at this time. However, the fairly significant differences in self-reported indebtedness suggest that financial concerns (e.g., insufficient funds) may very well be a motivational factor behind students’ employment practices.

Table 5. Financial differences between seniors who thought employment impeded their educational attainment and those who indicated that it had no effect.

	<u>Impeded</u>	<u>No Effect</u>
Percentage receiving a merit award at the time of admission	13%	56%
Percentage borrowing a minimum of \$20,000 for their undergraduate education	40%	27%
Percentage borrowing a minimum of \$30,000 for their undergraduate education	23%	9%
Percentage owing at least \$1,000 on their personal credit card	62%	36%
Percentage owing at least \$1,500 on their personal credit card	52%	27%
Percentage owing at least \$2,500 on their personal credit card	32%	14%

The data indicate that students enjoy many benefits from their employment. In addition to providing income, work positively affects their happiness and social life, and the experience helps prepare them for post-college life. Students who work long hours, however, may be compromising their college education. It behooves all who work with students to understand at what point a student's education is jeopardized because of over-employment and to take the appropriate steps to help students restore the balance between their educational goals and their job demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As part of the advising process, advisors should discuss the amount of time students spend at off-campus employment. Excessive work hours coupled with poor grades and earning 12 credits or less for more than one semester indicates that a student is not making satisfactory academic progress. Strategies to help the student get back on track should be discussed.
2. Financial aid packaging methodology should be examined to see if policies and practices which increase the retention and graduation rate can be implemented.
3. Information is needed about what students are purchasing with their credit cards. Are credit cards used, primarily, to purchase books and school supplies or for personal entertainment? This data will enhance the understanding of students' financial status.

References

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