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The Effect of Paid Work On Academic Performance Amongst UNH Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of working a part-time job while enrolled in classes full time amongst college students. There were a total of 459 respondents from a large, public university in the Northeast who responded to an online survey. The survey analyzed the differences in Grade Point Averages (GPAs) between students based on the number of hours they worked per week. It also considered whether the position worked related to a given student's field of study. The results suggest that working 30 hours is a threshold for when students' GPAs are negatively affected, and that working in a position related to a student's given major has positive effects on their GPA.

Introduction & Literature Review

It is imperative that college students are successful during their time in school, as they will be filling up the work force and taking on more responsibilities. College is meant to widen and strengthen the minds of young people as they transition to adulthood as well as prepare them to work effectively in their profession once they graduate. However, the average cost of attending a public college or university has increased by roughly 13% in the past six years (College Board 2016). This places a huge monetary burden on them at the very beginning of their career, resulting in many students obtaining paid employment while in college. The current study analyzes the effect of paid employment on college students' academic success.

Many researchers have conducted research studies to gain knowledge on this aspect of college life. For example, Wang et al. specifically looked at the effects of working a part-time job on the academic performance of college students in a Chinese society. This study looked at the students' reasoning for acquiring the job, as well as characteristics of the individual's job. This study found that if a student's motive for working the job was to earn work experience, their GPA went up by 0.39 points on average (Wang et al. 2010). If the job they worked was related to the student's field of study, the GPA rose by 0.27 points on average (Wang et al. 2010). The authors found that working a part-time job raised the student's GPA by 0.30 if the job worked helped them gain knowledge and develop skills (Wang et al. 2010).

Another study analyzed how an increasing amount of employment hours affects a student's GPA, using a sample of Midwestern public university students. This study found that working a part-time job had a beneficial effect on a student's GPA, with the greatest

improvement being in students working between one and ten hours per week (Tessema et al. 2015). However, they also found that students working over 30 hours per week had the lowest GPAs.

An additional study done by Yanbarisova (2015) analyzed the impact of employment on academic performance using a sample of college students living in Tatarstan. An interesting aspect of this study was that it considered whether a student's job was in their academic field or not. The authors found that the majority of the "top students" worked in their academic field (full-time and part-time)(Yanbarisova 2015). The author also found that another majority of the "top students" were those who did not work at all (Yanbarisova 2015). The only case in which Yanbarisova (2015) found employment to have a negative impact on academic performance was when a student was working full-time outside their academic field.

A final study examined the effects of working on college students' academic performance as well as their likelihood to complete a given year of schooling. These researchers found that student employment had a negative effect on academic performance (Kosi and Nastav and Sustersic 2013). However, they found that this negative relationship was only present when a student works over 18 hours per week. They found that working a "modest" number of hours (8 per week) did not hurt a student's academic performance. Ultimately, these studies convey the importance of analyzing the effects of working for pay on students' academic performance.

Research Methods

My study utilized a convenience sample of college students from a large, public university in the Northeast. While convenience samples have quite a few weaknesses, this sampling method was appropriate due to the targeted population of interest being college students, as well as the lack of time and resources at our disposal. Students in a sociology research methods course sent out surveys to students in late October via social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter. These surveys utilized Qualtrics, which is a prominent research platform. After we reached a desired amount of respondents, the survey was closed halfway through November. The sample consisted of 459 college students. These respondents varied by class standing, age, major, race, as well as other demographic variables. Of these respondents, 14% were freshmen, 22% were sophomores, 39% were juniors, 18% were seniors, and 7% responded “other” (non-traditional or graduate students).

My research study focuses on the impact of working a paid-job while attending a college or university full-time (12 or more credits). I included a few questions in our survey to measure my variables. The first question, which measures my independent variable (GPA), simply, “what is your current GPA?” This question was very straightforward, providing possible responses starting at 1.99 or less, then increasing by 0.5 intervals. The next question, which measured my dependent variable (working for pay), is “how many hours per week do you participate in paid work, on average?” The response categories for this question were five-hour ranges, starting with

1-5 hours per week, going up to 26-30 hours per week. There was also a response category of “30 or more.” If someone responded that they do not work, Qualtrics did not ask them to answer this question. The last question included in this research study, is, “does your current job or volunteer position relate to your field of study,” with answer categories being simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I hypothesized that holding a part-time, paid job will result in an increase in academic performance (GPA).

Results

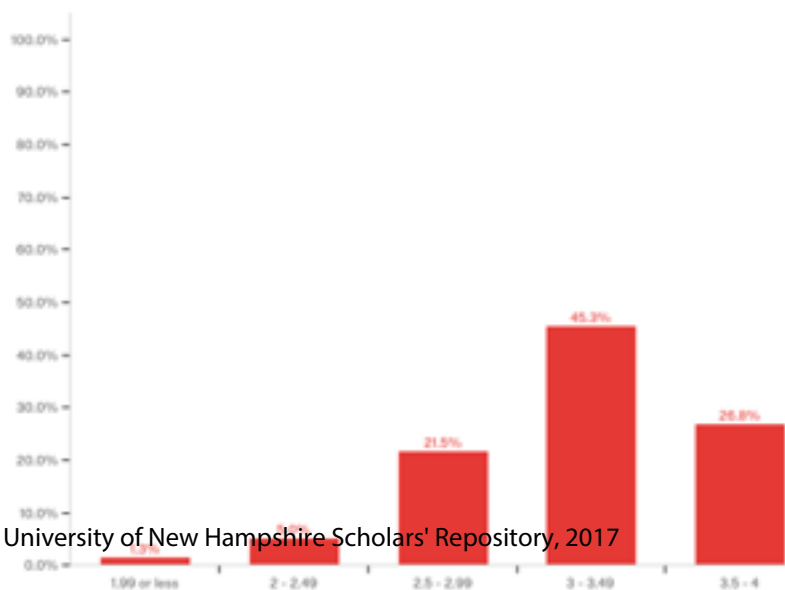
Section 1:

Our sample consisted of 459 college students from a large, public university in the Northeast. 75% of all respondents characterized their gender as female, with 23% responding that they identify as male. One percent of our sample said they identified as a transgender man, and one percent said that they were gender nonconforming. Fourteen percent of our participants were freshman, twenty-two percent were sophomores, thirty-nine percent were juniors, eighteen percent were seniors, and seven percent were non-traditional or graduate students.

Section 2: Amount of Hours Worked & Grade Point Average (GPA)

My dependent variable is academic performance, or specifically, GPA. Of our

Figure 1: Distribution of Grade Point Averages (GPAs)



respondents, 45% had GPAs between 3.0 and 3.49. Twenty seven percent had GPAs between 3.5 and 4.0. The rest of our sample had GPAs under a 3.0

with, 22 percent having between 2.5 and 2.99, 5% having between a 2.0 and 2.49, and only 1% had a GPA of 1.99 or lower.

My independent variable is the amount of hours a student works per week (on average).

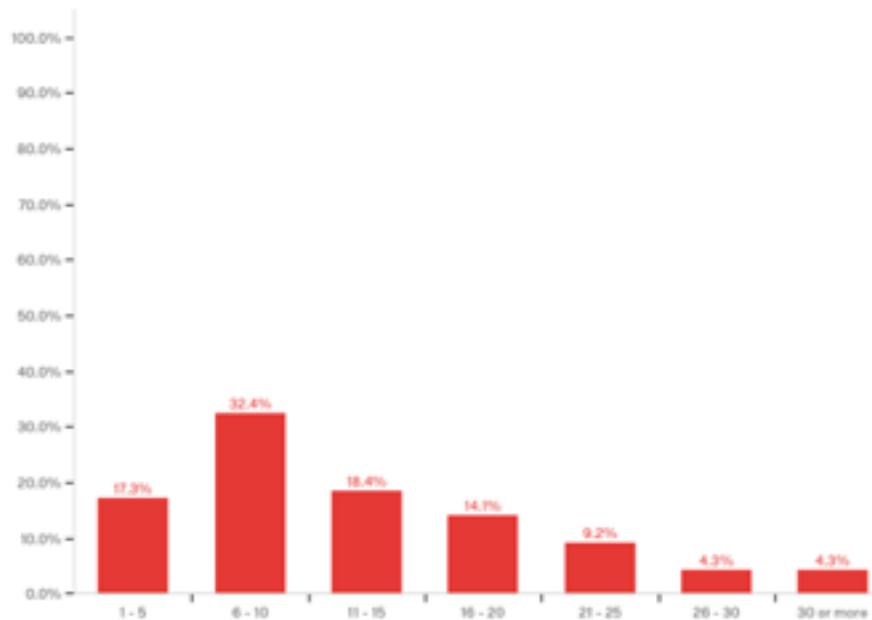
The distribution can be seen

in figure two. The largest portion of students (32.4%) who work for pay tend to work 6-10 hours per week.

After that range, the amount students working drops significantly to 18.4% for 11-15 hours per week. Then it drops to 17.3% for 1-5

hours, 14.1% for 16-20 hours, 9.2% working 21-25 hours, then 4.3% for both 26-30 hours and 30 or more hours, respectively.

Figure 2: Distribution of Hours Worked per Week



Section 3: Findings

The data was analyzed using the Qualtrics' cross-tabulation function. This function creates contingency table, and a chi-square table to determine the

Figure 3: Hours Worked & GPA

		How many hours per week do you participate in paid work, on average?			Total
		1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20	21-25, 26-30	30 or more	
What is your current GPA?	1.99 or less, 2-2.49, 2.5-2.99	58 30.85%	9 26.47%	10 76.92%	77 32.77%
	3 - 3.49	78 41.49%	17 50.00%	2 15.38%	97 41.28%
	3.5 - 4	52 27.66%	8 23.53%	1 7.69%	61 25.96%
Total		188 100.00%	34 100.00%	13 100.00%	235 100.00%

		How many hours per week do you participate in paid work, on average?
		Chi Square
What is your current GPA?	Degrees of Freedom	4
	p-value	0.01

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statistical significance of the relationship between the two variables. Figure 3 shows a cross-tabulation between hours of paid work (per week) and GPA, with a p-value of 0.01, indicating statistical significance at a $p < 0.01$ level. As seen in Figure 4, 76.92% of students working 30 hours or more per week had a GPA of 2.99 or lower. This is consistent with the findings published by Tessema et al. (2015), arguing that working 30 hours or more has a significant *negative* impact on academic performance. This is interesting because amongst students working between 21 and 30 hours, only 26.47% of them have a 2.99 or lower GPA. That is a significant drop in percentage. The highest GPAs amongst our sample belong to the students working between 1 and 20 hours per week, with 27.66% of them earning a 3.5 or higher GPA. These findings lead me to reject the null hypothesis that working a part-time paid job has no effect on a student's GPA.

Figure 4 shows a cross tabulation between a student's current GPA, and whether their job

Figure 4: Job Relation to Field of Study & GPA

		Does your current job or volunteer position relate to your field of study?		Total
		Yes	No	
What is your current GPA?	1.99 or less, 2-2.49, 2.5-2.99	24 23.53%	67 32.37%	91 29.45%
	3 - 3.49	36 35.29%	100 48.31%	136 44.01%
	3.5 - 4	42 41.18%	40 19.32%	82 26.54%
Total		102 100.00%	207 100.00%	309 100.00%

		Does your current job or volunteer position relate to your field of study??
What is your current GPA?	Chi Square	16.74
	Degrees of Freedom	2
	p-value	0.00

or volunteer position relates to their field of study, with a p-value of 0.00, also indicating statistical significance on a $p < 0.01$ level. As seen in Figure 4, working at a job related to your field of study has

a positive impact on a given students GPA. Amongst students working at a job related to their

major, 41.18% have GPAs of 3.5 or higher, whereas only 19.32% of the students working jobs that are not related to their field of study have the same GPA. That is half of the percentage that those working a job related to their major had. It is also worth noting that the highest percentage of students with lower GPAs (2.99 or lower) is seen amongst students not working a job related to their field of study. This could suggest that working a job that someone is passionate about or interested in, could have a beneficial effect on their GPA.

Conclusion

The main finding of this research study is that there is a given threshold where working a part-time job starts to have negative effects on a student's GPA. This threshold is witnessed at roughly 30 hours per week, which is consistent with some of the current literature. Most literature agrees that there is a threshold, with slight variation regarding whether the threshold is 20 or up to 30 hours per week. The goal of this study was to explore this aspect of student life. If applied, my findings might help students to be successful in their academic careers. While college is expensive, I have found that it is academically detrimental for students to work more than 30 hours per week. Working a job which is related to a student's field of study, however, might improve a student's chances of earning a higher GPA.

The biggest limitation of this study relates to my sampling method and the sample itself. First of all, we used a convenience sample. By its nature, convenience sampling has no aspect of randomness, which means that the likelihood that our sample is representative to Northeastern

college students is quite low. This means that generalizing our findings to apply to them to general Northeastern university college students is not possible. The other issue is that our sample is not diverse, with almost 85% of respondents being White/Caucasian. The United States is a much more diverse country, which means that generalizing our findings to all college students is also not possible. Further research should include samples from multiple colleges or universities to learn more about the U.S.'s college population as a whole. Another interesting aspect for future research would be to analyze how different types of jobs might affect academic performance, such as comparing office-work to jobs involving physical labor.

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