

# Students At Work: Classroom Implications Of Outside Employment

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## Abstract

*With the growing population of nontraditional students, questions have been posed as to whether or not student employment results in better academic performance. This study measures the effects of employment experiences on university and classroom dynamics. Undergraduate business students from a large, private university constituted the sample. They were surveyed to determine the relationship between their university and work experiences. Findings suggest that work and educational efforts do not always compete. For many, it appears the same intangibles that propel individuals to excel in a job carries over into the academic arena. Implications for Business Education are presented.*

## INTRODUCTION

College students are engaging in work experiences outside the classroom at an increasing rate. It is occurring in so many institutions, that working students are the new standard that can redefine the meaning of a college student. Students may work to pay educational expenses, to maintain daily living expenditures and to meet other financial obligations. Their employment can be motivated by career path pursuits if their jobs are in areas related to their field of study. These employment trends are part of the changing demographics of college students (Ruff, 2004). Unlike traditional students who have recently graduated from high school, non-traditional students are commonly employed and renew educational pursuits at more advanced ages. Working students are becoming main stream. Because these students now share time, loyalty and priorities between employment and education, many instructors have changed their approach to classroom dynamics (Bailey, & Mingle, 2003).

The transition from a student body comprised almost solely of full time students without employment responsibilities to one that includes large numbers of employees seems here to stay. Hence, the impact on traditional educational roles and academic success appears worthy of study.

Of particular interest is how demographic trends are influencing business education as employment is a part of and now redefining the undergraduate learning experience. This research will show if business education needs to adjust teaching methods in relation to student employment experiences. In a business curriculum where the potential for synergy between employment and education may be the greatest, educators may feel they are competing for students' attention. Their greatest concern is that students have diluted their time and do not have the desire or time to learn the required material (Donathon, 2003). This is also complicated by trends such as grade inflation, decreasing student body populations, reduced respect from students and increased demand for the use of technology. Other studies enforce the concern that students do not devote enough time or attention to their studies (King, 2004).

## **MOTIVATING FACTORS**

Demographic and financial needs appear to contribute to the rise in employment rates. Since college students today are older than in past years (Boardman, 2004) many have family and work responsibilities. Also, since the cost of tuition has steadily outpaced the overall inflation rate (Brownstein, 2004) financial pressures continue to grow. As a result, students seek gainful employment and not necessarily meaningful employment: money rewards over intrinsic rewards.

Education is widely viewed and valued for its role in improving a person's economic station. A Princeton Review study (Franek, 2004) found business administration/management to be the most popular college major. Liberal arts and sciences ranked tenth. It seems that developing a meaningful philosophy of life has been replaced with developing an economically secure life. Also, socioeconomic conditions have caused many students to value job training over learning for learning sake (Levine & Cureton, 1998). As a result, many students see college as a bridge to financial and career success. This alone may be the strongest reason for high rates of student employment.

## **BENEFITS AND SYNERGIES**

With this focus on the practical nature of modern education, there are many benefits that accrue to students from outside employment. Since learning is not limited to the classroom, other benefits are related to actual work experience. Employment activities can provide company training as distinct from academic classroom experiences. Education prepares students with general knowledge that can be applied to various situations, whereas training is specific to a job. Thus, it is argued that business education can be enhanced from workplace activities. Moreover, training and education can be synergistic and mutually enhancing since technical skills specific to a company or industry are usually not part of a college curriculum. Synergy can be found when a student's employment is related to his or her major or concentration.

In general, a circular relationship can emerge and enhance both workplace and classroom performance. Working students can apply theory to practical situations in their workplace. In addition, employment experience that extends job and career knowledge can be used by students to plan a course of study. That is, students can consider what kind of work they prefer based on sampling various work positions.

Networking opportunities can be available to the student engaged in outside employment (Kramer, 1997). This process of building and maintaining positive and supportive organizational relationships could be transferred to the classroom. Outside employment can expose students to the mentoring process. The mentor can provide the student with a role model and facilitate career awareness and advancement. There is also a long history of internships that express the reciprocal nature of work and study. All of these benefits can contribute to a better long term employee/organizational environment fit as students obtain realistic job previews. This, in turn, may increase job satisfaction, job performance, and can lead to successful careers.

Despite all these potential benefits, the positive relationship between outside employment and academic performance remains far from conclusive. Many educational professionals believe that students should not maintain outside employment, especially first year students. The clear assumption is that work consumes time, a crucial resource in attaining academic goals. Goals such as high grade point average or developing leadership skills, for example, require time for study and involvement in campus groups and student activities. Employment can reduce the student to marginal membership in the academic community if the connection is only the classroom. This study will examine students at work and present the classroom implications.

## **METHOD**

The study sample used to empirically test survey questions in a classroom environment consisted of students in seven business classes. The questionnaire was distributed, administered and completed in class. The undergraduate business students were sophomores, juniors and seniors and had completed basic courses in management, marketing, finance and accounting and were arrayed across business disciplines. The questionnaire consists of 10 items that were

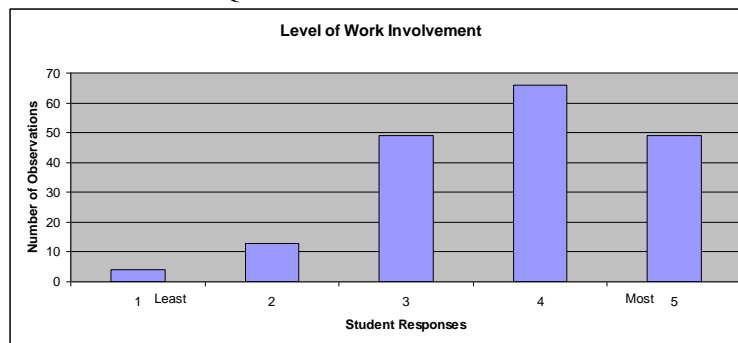
agreed or disagreed with a seven-point Likert scale. The following survey items were addressed:

1. Level of Work Involvement
2. Level of Academic Involvement
3. Employment Hours per Week
4. Anticipated Years of Completion of Degree
5. Level of Work Responsibility
6. Level of University Involvement (extracurricular activities)
7. Degree to Which Student Role is Valued
8. Degree to Which Employee Role is Valued
9. Degree to Which Work Reduces Social Activities (outside leisure)
10. Degree to Which Employment Reduces Study Activities

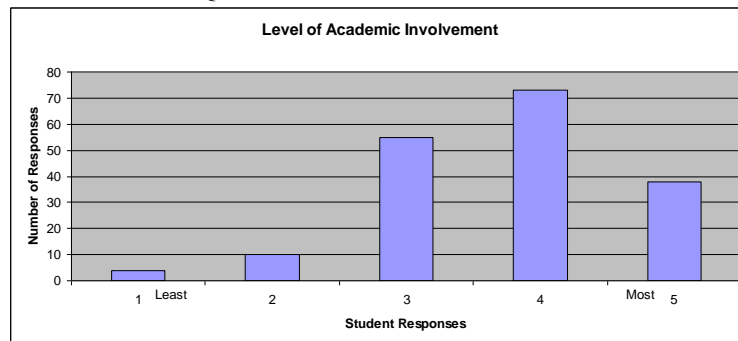
**RESULTS**

The ten histograms presented reflects the ten survey questions: work involvement, academic involvement, employment hours, anticipated years to complete degree, work responsibility, university involvement, employee role, student role, degree to which employment reduces social activities and degree to which employment reduce study activities. Histograms Q1 and Q2 representing the level of work involvement and the level of academic involvement show high values. A circular relationship may exist between work involvement and academic involvement. Involvement in one area leads to involvement in other areas. Exposure to the work world may create a new mindset with new perspectives. This thinking can enhance the educational process with theory/practice synergy. The students represented in Q1 and Q2 may also seek knowledge for knowledge sake while exhibiting an inner drive.

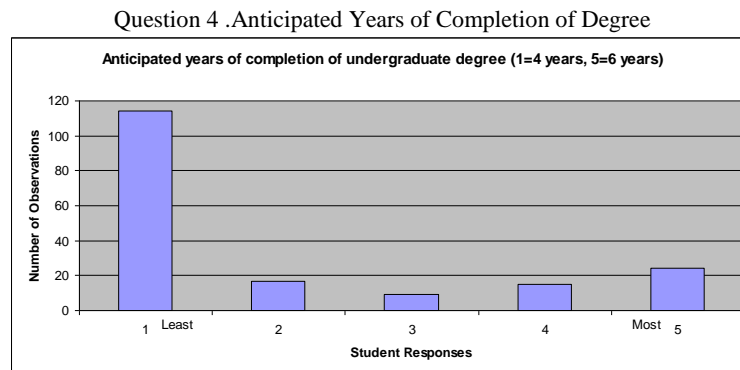
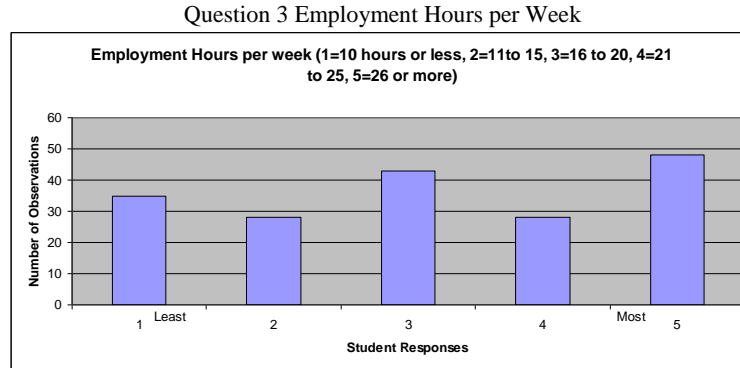
Q 1 Level of Work Involvement



Q 2 Level of Academic Involvement



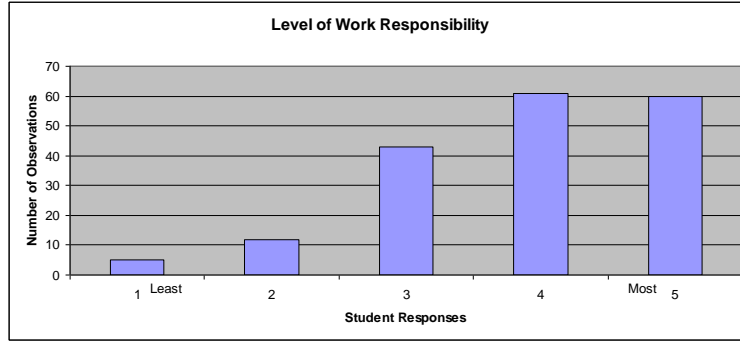
Histogram Q3 shows hours of work per week and histogram Q4 represents anticipated years to complete a degree program. Although the hours worked appear evenly arrayed across the number of observations, a wide majority of students expect to graduate in four years (histogram Q4). This suggests that students who take more time may become less committed to studies the longer they remaining in school. However, the optimal number of hours is not suggested for timely graduation. Thus, the notion that work reduces academic time is not supported insofar as number of years for graduation. This seems counter intuitive. Also, some observers claim that students should work less than 15 hours per week (King, 1998).



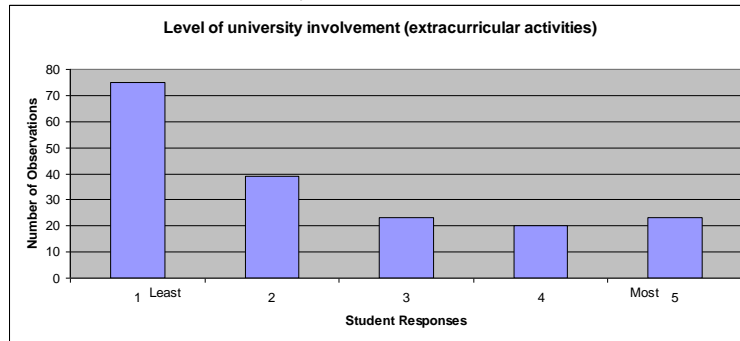
Histogram Q5 depicts the level of work responsibility. This shows that most students report high or very high levels of work responsibility. This graph suggest that managers with much work responsibility and few available study hours have a higher anticipated of completion then a fast food worker with many available study hours. Those students with high levels of responsibilities could have more adaptive skills, and personal integration of work duties. They also have a background in problem solving, self direction and practicality. Overall, a hard worker in one area can be a hard worker in another area.

University involvement and the value placed on the student role are depicted in Histograms Q6 and Q7. Histogram Q6 show that most students report low or very low university involvement. This seems consistent with histogram Q7 that show students do not value their role as high as expected. Those students with marginal membership in university life may underachieve in academic performance. This may indicate the need for colleges to improve student campus involvement.

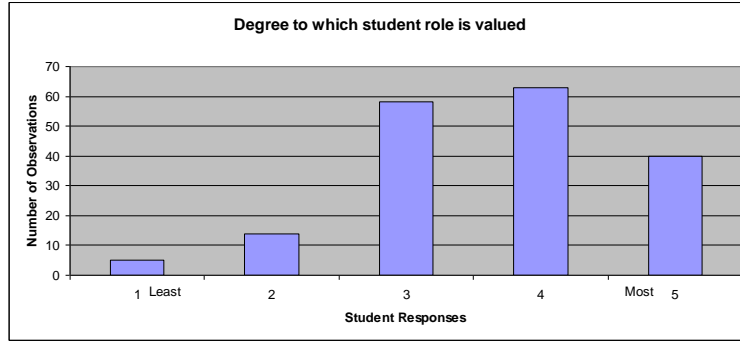
Q 5 Level of Work Responsibility



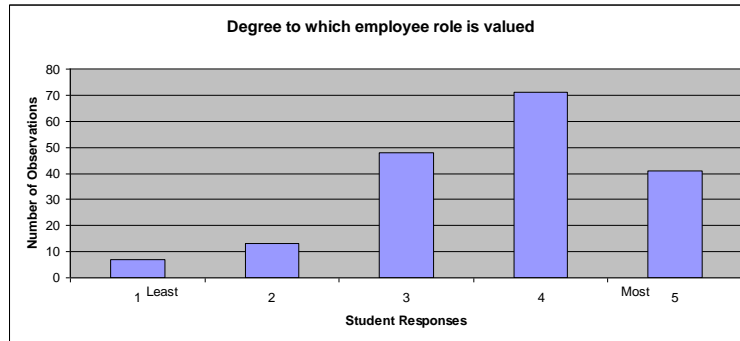
Q 6 Level of University Involvement (extracurricular activities)



Q 7 Degree to Which Student Role is Valued



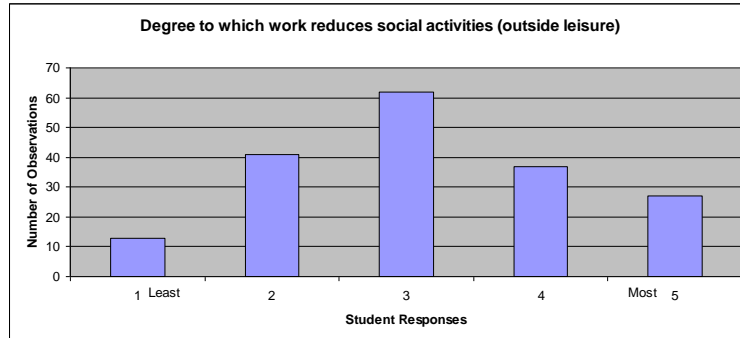
Q 8 Degree to Which Student Role is Valued



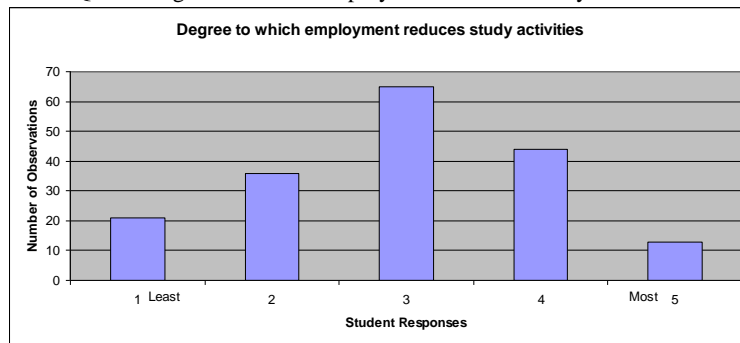
In opposition, histogram Q8 shows the degree to which the employee role is valued. Students appear to value their role as employees more than as students. The need for curriculum change that incorporates work experience is suggested.

The most normally distributed data set can be found in histogram Q9 showing the degree to which work reduces social activities. Work can reduce study time histogram Q10 as well as social activities.

Q 9 Degree to Which Work Reduces Social Activities (outside leisure)



Q. 10. Degree to Which Employment Reduces Study Activities



### Discussion And Recommendations

Needs assessment should be an ongoing process. A common practice is to focus efforts on traditional freshmen to enhance their academic success. Parallel systems have been developed for nontraditional students (Boardman, 2004). Many of these systems include feedback mechanisms and have been found to be effective for program evaluation and also are used for program needs assessment. These cyclical and continual types of assessment programs can be related to student performance as well. The process is as follows. One year certain types of groups and/or needs are examined. This continues each year or on some schedule, such as every semester or every other semester, until the cycle needs to be modified (in many cases, a cycle also may need to be modified while it is occurring) because of changes in student performance results. This is explained in part by changing demands, increased work hours, expectations, responsibly, involvement and values. Other criteria, such as changes in abilities, interests, and performance of other currently enrolled students should be considered. These variables are part of the research analysis and are used to determine the impacts of performance over time. This paper explored the shifting relationships in business education.

In this study, both level of work and academic involvement showed high values. Achievement motivation, suggested by high work involvement, can influence academic performance. These students may have an internal locus of control rather than external. Work involvement can lead to greater productivity that may lead to higher GPAs

in the classroom. This relationship is worthy of further study.

Students report high or very high levels of work responsibility. This can enhance personal productivity or development that can lead to better academic performance. A halo effect could be operating if instructors view students with high levels of work responsibility as talented and capable of high level academic performance. Also, research has suggested that out of class experiences contribute to critical thinking skills beyond classroom experience (Terenzini et. al., 1994). This together with presumed greater adaptive skills and a broader background in problem solving can positively impact academic performance. Future research can determine if students with high levels of work responsibility are transferring this trait to the classroom.

University involvement and the value placed on the student role were reported as low or very low. Students may have developed a mindset seeing themselves as consumers of education rather than as members of a community. Colleges may have to redouble their efforts to improve student campus involvement and better promoted extracurricular activities

Given the importance of involvement in the study the following may be deployed to maintain or improve relationships with students: updating course description, creating a class website, contact with instructors of prerequisites to preview the next course and improve advising and counseling. Coursework can be work relevant with assignments, papers and cases based on the students work experience. Social integration with small class size would also contribute to this application by increasing student satisfaction with the business education process. Overall, an instructor can stress how a course relates to the curriculum and to career while encouraging participation within a culture of success.

Time management and goal setting can help students balance their academic and job requirements (Trueman, M & Harty, J. A 1996). Instructors can discuss multiple tasking and time management such as prioritizing and Parkinson Law. Time management and goal setting can help students focus on the activities that yield the greatest return on academic and career success.

Students appear to value their role as employees more than as students. Comparing classical education with the modern need for education may provide a basis for an overall attitude change towards outside employment. The former, began in ancient Greece and adopted by the Romans, passed to England and to America. Indeed, in 1776 classical education was thriving in America. Classical education seeks knowledge for its own sake with emphasis on languages, philosophy, logic, beauty, rhetoric and moral virtues. The modern role of education is seen as a path in fulfilling other needs, especially professional and economic needs. This represents a societal change that flows to the college curriculum and professional education.

In any society, the dominating force will influence other institutions. As the old saw goes “the business of America is business.” Today, an education is widely viewed and valued for its role in improving a person’s economic station. It seems that developing a meaningful philosophy of life is replaced with developing a sound financial position. A change in educational emphasis may be needed from the classical approach where students seek knowledge for its own sake to an approach where students seek education to fulfill employment opportunities. This represents a societal change with obvious implications for curricular content and teaching pedagogies.

Future research can determine if outside work activities is a good predictor of academic performance. If results suggest that work experiences are helpful with academic performance it should be part of the educational process. Also, integrating outside work activities can help students and business school enrollments. According to Mintzberg (2004) business school classes are focused on analysis and techniques instead of clinical experience. Various approaches and different types of strategic alliances can better prepare students to excel in academic and job performance. Instructors and students can embrace new teaching styles where course work is more integrated with job experiences.

With the number of working students increasing, new social contracts are needed in the classroom. This paper presented the implications of outside employment and suggested different approaches to influencing student

classroom performance. Education is a major determinate of social and financial success. It offers a moral compass found within the tents of the classical model. The Aristotle “mean” calls for life in balance: modern research shows that the job/life satisfaction relationship is circular. Therefore, personal growth and economic potential should be realized outcomes from a well-planned business education.

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