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A Quantitative Exploration of the Effects of Employment on High-Achieving African American College Students

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the association between employment status and student involvement for academically high-achieving African American students (HAAASs) attending one master's-granting, large, predominantly White institution in the Midwestern United States. Findings from this study contribute to and expand upon existing literature by suggesting that employment does not influence the amount of time HAAASs study or participate within student organizations. Implications for future research are also explored.

Keywords: African American college students, employment, high-achieving

As a result of many factors, today's students often seek employment during the college experience. Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, and Hurtado (2005) found that 47% of African American students require employment during college to assist with tuition; this may be problematic since research relating to the experiences of students of color suggests that off-campus employment negatively influences persistence to graduation (Choy, 2001; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Oseguera, 2005/06). Furthermore, Astin (1993) concluded that employment during college is related to an overall lower grade point average (GPA). A study by Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2004) suggested that involvement in work-study programs might also have a negative impact on GPA. Providing a possible explanation for these findings is Tinto's (1993) belief that "employment not only limits the time one has for academic studies, it also severely limits one's opportunities for interaction with other students" (p. 269).

Literature relating to academic success has consistently stated that the time and effort individuals place on activities that encourage learning matters during college (Astin, 1984; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Witt, & Associates, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reflected on this notion stating that "the more the student is psychologically engaged in activities and tasks that reinforce and extend the formal academic experience, the more he or she will learn" (p. 119). Examples of such activities presented by the previously mentioned authors involve time spent studying and involvement within student organizations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how employment status influences the amount of time high-achieving African American students (HAAASs) study alone,

study with friends, and are involved within student organizations. The results of this survey contribute to and expand upon existing literature relating to employment during college.

Method

Data for this study was gathered as part of a larger study investigating the experiences of high-achieving African American students at one predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwestern United States.

Participants

A census sample of 353 undergraduate students identifying as African American attending one master's large PWI in the Midwestern United States were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. The participants self-identified as African American within the institutional records system, held sophomore or higher status, and possessed a grade point average (GPA) of greater than or equal to 3.0 at the time the survey was distributed; the 3.0 threshold for academic high-achievement was utilized to align with previous studies (see Guiffrida, 2004; Harper, 2005, 2008, 2012). The target population is a portion of the total undergraduate African American population consisting of approximately 1300 students. 101 students completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 28.6%.

Data Collection

An invitation to participate in the study was sent to the target population by the institution's office of institutional research. The invitation informed students about the anonymous nature of the survey, how to contact the researcher, that exact GPAs were not disclosed to the researcher, and that participation was voluntary and could be ceased at any time. Once participants began the survey, there was no time limit for one to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Responses to questions relating to employment during college were cross-tabulated to investigate the relationship between employment and involvement for high-achieving African American students. Additionally, Fisher's Exact Test for Count Data was utilized to investigate the association between employment status and student involvement. The alpha level was set at $p = .05$, and the margin of error was calculated as $\pm 7.15\%$ at a 95% confidence level.

Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the relationship between employment and the amount of time HAAASs spent studying or completing coursework alone, studying or completing coursework with friends or classmates, and involved within student organizations. When utilizing Fisher's Exact Test for Count Data, the data suggest there is no association between employment status and the time students spend studying alone ($p = .322$). Students most frequently reported spending 6-10 hours studying alone per week, regardless of employment status ($n = 49$). Additionally, the data suggest that there is no association between employment status and the time students spend studying or completing coursework with friends or classmates ($p = .695$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours studying with friends and classmates per week, regardless of employment status ($n = 85$). Furthermore, the researcher found that there is no association between employment status and the time students spend participating in student organizations ($p = .775$). Students most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours participating in student activities per week, regardless of employment status ($n = 75$).

Next, the number of hours working on-campus was cross-tabulated with the amount of time HAAASs spent studying or completing coursework alone, studying or completing coursework with friends or classmates, and involved within student organizations. This analysis included a sample of 25 students who identified as being employed on-campus at the time of the survey. The researcher found that there is no association between the number of hours working on-campus and the time students spend studying alone ($p = .776$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending 6-10 hours studying alone, regardless of the number of hours spent working on-campus ($n = 11$). Furthermore, the data suggest that there is no association between the number of hours working on-campus and the time students spend studying with friends and classmates ($p = .740$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours studying with friends and classmates per week, regardless of the number of hours spent working on-campus ($n = 23$). Additionally, the researcher found that there is no association between the number of hours working on-campus and the time students spend participating in student organizations ($p = .528$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours participating in student organizations per week, regardless of the number of hours spent working on-campus ($n = 17$).

Finally, the researcher cross-tabulated the number of hours working off-campus with the amount of time HAAASs spent studying or completing coursework alone, studying or completing coursework with friends, and involved within student organizations. Thirty-one (31) students identified the amount of time they were employed off-campus and the amount of time they spent studying alone per week. Utilizing Fisher's Exact Test for Count Data, the researcher found that there is no association between the number of hours working off-campus and the time students spend studying alone ($p = .816$). Students most frequently reported spending 6-10 hours studying alone per week, regardless of the number of hours working off-campus ($n = 13$). Twenty-nine (29) students identified the amount of time they were employed off-campus and the time they spent studying with friends and classmates per week within this

analysis. The data suggest that there is no association between hours working off-campus and studying with friends and classmates ($p = .323$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours studying with friends and classmates per week, regardless of the number of hours spent working off-campus ($n = 25$). Thirty (30) students identified the amount of hours they were employed off-campus and their amount of involvement within student organizations per week within this analysis. The researcher found that there is no association between the number of hours working off-campus and the time students spend participating in student organizations ($p = .511$). Students in this sample most frequently reported spending less than 5 hours participating in student organizations per week, regardless of the number of hours spent working off-campus ($n = 26$).

Table 1
Employment Type and Hours of Involvement per Week

Variable	On-Campus	Off-Campus	Not Employed
<i>Studying Alone</i>			
5 or less	5 ^a (20.0) ^b	6 (19.4)	2 (4.7)
6 to 10	11 (44.0)	13 (41.9)	25 (58.1)
11 to 15	8 (32.0)	9 (29.0)	11 (25.6)
16 or more	1 (4.0)	3 (9.7)	5 (11.6)
<i>Studying with Friends</i>			
5 or less	23 (92.0)	25 (86.2)	37 (86.0)
6 to 10	1 (4.0)	3 (10.3)	5 (11.6)
11 to 15	1 (4.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)
16 or more	0 (0.0)	1 (3.4)	0 (0.0)
<i>Student Organizations</i>			
5 or less	17 (68.0)	26 (86.7)	32 (76.2)
6 to 10	5 (20.0)	3 (10.0)	6 (14.3)
11 to 15	1 (4.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.4)
16 or more	2 (8.0)	1 (3.3)	3 (7.1)

Note. ^aN. ^bRate per 100.

Discussion

In this study, the author explored how employment status impacts HAAASs study habits and co-curricular involvement comparing HAAASs who were either non-employed or employed on- or off-campus. The researcher found that there is no association between employment status and study habits or student involvement as HAAASs demonstrated similar behaviors. Yet, scholars have noted that off-campus employment might hinder students' educational outcomes (i.e., Choy, 2001; Oseguera, 2005/06). The findings demonstrate that there may be differences for HAAASs studying at a predominantly White institution. Furthermore, when comparing only the HAAASs

who were employed, they studied and were involved in student organizations at the same rate, statistically.

One might assume HAAASs who are employed and work more hours would display different patterns in their study and involvement. Yet, this study did not find evidence to support that assumption. Perhaps, these findings identify a resiliency possessed by HAAASs, particularly for those who were employed. No matter the employment status of the participants, the students were involved and studied at the same rates, statistically speaking. Furthermore, HAAASs who were employed sometimes outperformed their non-employed counterparts.

Future Research

Lastly, these data highlight the importance of comparing students from similar backgrounds. Cross-identity comparisons (i.e., studies comparing students from different races, income-levels, etc.) often show stark differences. Nevertheless, because of the disparate backgrounds compared, student affairs practitioners are often unable to capture salient or “real world” variables from empirical research to implement effective practices.

There are several areas of research that might be explored concerning these findings: First, a large-scale study, along with more sophisticated statistical analyses, would be useful to determine if there are broader implications for these findings at diverse institutional contexts. Second, qualitative research building on Steele’s work might highlight the commonalities behind the resiliency we posit was identified in the study. Third, what are HAAASs who are unemployed doing with their extra time, if they may be studying and involved at similar rates? If that is truly the case, is it okay that they protect the extra time since they are high-achievers? If so, how does that create tension for literature supporting involvement and/or engagement? Fourth, why did on- versus off-campus employment not show statistically significant differences for HAAASs? Fifth, what impact does employment status have on academic outcomes beyond time spent studying (i.e., GPA, persistence) for HAAASs? Sixth, why are HAAASs minimally involved if there are, in fact, positive educational outcomes associated with involvement? Lastly, how does gender influence the findings and future research on this topic?

These areas of exploration might assist student affairs professionals who work with HAAASs at predominantly White institutions and other institutional contexts. The researcher plans to further explore some of these research questions and encourages other scholars to explore them as well, as linking student involvement to tangible academic outcomes is critical in the age of access, affordability, and accountability.

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