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Student Work Issues: Implications for College Transition and Retention

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With ever-rising college tuition costs, reductions in the availability of financial aid (Curtis & Nimmer, 1991), and an increased desire for financial independence (Canabal, 1998), it is becoming increasingly necessary for a greater number of today's college students to work their way through college. Students working while in college has become the rule rather than the exception (Kane, Healy, & Henson, 1992). Due to the ever-increasing number of students working while in college, a number of job-affected outcomes such as reduced semester course load, grade fluctuations, persistence in school, cognitive development, and overall school performance have been observed and studied by researchers (Canabal, 1998; Gleason, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Parcarella, Bohr, Nora, Desler & Zusman, 1994; Parcarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini 1998). Stern and Nakata (1991), based on analyses of several studies concerning the effects of holding a job while in college, concluded that students who work during college are more likely to drop out or take longer to complete their programs, and will have a higher positive correlation with performance in school when the job is more closely related to their chosen major.

Despite all of these issues regarding student employment, limited research has been done that examines employed student job stress and its relation to aspects of college life. Job stress can be defined as work demands that exceed the worker's ability to effectively cope with surroundings such as school (Rice, 1987). Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) reported that holding a job while in college contributes to overall stress levels and therefore higher perceived stress. Because of the increased levels of stress and constant challenges of college life for working college students, student affairs personnel are being asked for advice, counsel, and recommendations regarding how students can effectively balance working while attending school (Hencke, Lyons, & Krachenberg, 1993). Moreover, the effects of job stress on college life could have serious effects on retention.

Recent research regarding employed student job stress indicates a difference in stress levels among employed and non-employed students. However, what has yet to be investigated is the relationship between student job characteristics and student job stress and the total college experience. In order to counsel working students, student personnel need some kind of tool to assess student job stress and the relationship of the student's job characteristics to the overall college experience, including the student's transition into college life and retention. The purpose for conducting this study was to examine

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college student work issues and differences in job stress among student job characteristics using a survey designed to measure the job stress of employed college students. Employed student characteristics and their implications for college life and retention are discussed.

Research Methods

The Job Stress Measure for College Students (JSM-CS) survey was administered to a convenience sample of 275 college students at two Southeastern U.S. universities (one in Florida and one in Alabama) to examine employed college student characteristics and job-related factors affecting student life. The survey was administered to students in general health education undergraduate classes who volunteered to complete the survey for extra credit, outside of class. The survey was also administered to two graduate classes at one university. This provided a cross-section of student interests, maturity, and class standing.

Instrument Development

The JSM-CS was developed from an adapted version of Rice's Work Stress Profile (Rice, 1987). The initial Work Stress Profile was a 57-item questionnaire designed to provide information on adult work stress examining work conditions, job environments, and personal feelings towards jobs. The instrument has been tested in a sample of 275 school psychologists to measure job stress of these professionals. For the total scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .921 and the coefficient for all the three sub-scales were .898.

The JSM-CS was reduced to 45 items that were adapted for administration to college students. The reduction occurred by eliminating questions not applicable or appropriate to college students. The instrument was pre-pilot tested with 177 undergraduate students along with other stress-related measures. Specific methodology for this pre-pilot instrument is reported elsewhere (Calderon, Hey, & Seabert, 2001).

For the current study, the pre-pilot instrument data was further analyzed to construct a more refined instrument to measure college student work issues. Due to inadequate sample size for factor analysis from the pre-pilot data, items to be included in the pilot test were determined by correlation analyses. The 45 items from the pre-pilot administration of the instrument were categorized into sub-categories based on item context. The categories included job demands, job conditions, job/school schedules, job satisfaction, job responsibilities, competing sources of stress, job/school effects, and job security and were named based on item content and cross-correlations. Items with correlations higher than $r = 0.8$ with other items were retained for the final instrument. From these procedures, the number of items on the job stress measure was reduced from 45 to 25 items. Some items were reworded for further clarity and the instrument underwent expert panel review by college of education faculty with expertise in survey

development. The independent item format was kept by using Likert-type Scale responses (i.e., response choices being “never” to “almost always,” assigning a score from 0 – 4 respectively, for an item score total). This total job stress score may be able to provide the user/examiner with a general assessment of not only the stress endured by students from their jobs but also their job satisfaction. Based on the correlational analyses and item context, the first 25 items resulted in job-related statements, followed by eight items regarding job-related characteristics and seven general demographic items. Some of the items of the JSM-CS may also indicate how a student’s job is affecting important aspects of life such as class work and attendance, study time for exams, and preparing out of class assignments, recreation and leisure time, participation in campus clubs, organizations, and other extracurricular campus events, etc.

Analyses

A total job stress score was calculated from the JSM-CS. To examine college student work issues, relationships between this total stress score and student/student job characteristics such as income, GPA, number of work hours, and job type were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Coefficients. ANOVA procedures were run to determine differences in total stress among these variables. All results were determined significant at the .05 significance level.

Results

Sample Demographics and Job-Related Characteristics

The internal reliability coefficient for the JSM-CS was fair ($\alpha = 0.66$). All students answered all items on the measure; however for purposes of this study, only results for students having jobs are reported. Approximately, 154 students reported having jobs from the two university samples (resulting in 56% of the students being used for analyses). The employed student sample consisted of 47% male and 53% female; 67% Caucasian and 25% African-American; 68% junior and senior classification and 19% sophomore classification. The remainder of the students were 10% freshman classification and 4% graduate students. Seventy-nine percent of the students were under 24 years of age with only 21% being 24 years of age or older. Forty percent of the students were taking 7-12 semester hours, 45% were taking 13-15 semester hours and roughly 14% were taking over 16 semester hours. Thirty-nine percent of the students had a GPA between 3.01 and 4.0 and 56% had a GPA between 2.01 and 3.0, while the remaining 5% of the students had a GPA below 2.0.

As for the employed student demographic characteristics, 53% of the students had annual incomes of \$5000 or less from their jobs, 21% had annual incomes between \$5000 and \$9000, 13% made between \$9000 and \$12,000 and 12% made over \$12,000 from their jobs. Thirty percent of the students had jobs related to their major and only 23% had on-campus jobs. Roughly 23% worked 12 or fewer hours per week, 38%

worked between 13-24 hours per week, 25% worked 25-39 hours per week, and 14% worked 40 or more hours per week. In addition, 35% of students had one part-time job, 6% had one full-time job and the remaining 59% reported having multiple part- or full-time jobs or both. Twenty-five percent reported that their current job is the only work they could find.

Response frequencies for the 25 job stress items are presented in Table 1. A notable observation was that 43% of students reported that their lives would (always) be less stressful if they did not have to work and go to college at the same time. Some other observations include 26% reporting (almost always) that their job interferes with studying for exams; roughly 42% reported either always or almost always arranging their class schedule around their job schedule and 24% reporting (almost always) being physically exhausted when they get home from work.

As for relationships between total job stress and student/student job characteristics, a higher stress score was significantly related to higher income ($r = 0.32$, $p = 0.0001$); having a job not related to the declared major ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.004$); having an off-campus job ($r = 0.21$, $p = 0.01$); having a job that was the only work that could be found ($r = 0.18$, $p = 0.03$); and working more hours ($r = 0.33$, $p = 0.0001$). In examining differences among certain job stress characteristics using ANOVA procedures, total job stress differences were found for job income ($F = 6.51$, $p = 0.0004$). In other words, higher reported annual income levels were related to higher total job stress as compared to the lower level incomes. For income, the effect size was a 10-point difference in total stress score between the highest and lowest income, with average stress score of 70 and standard deviation of 13.

In addition, higher reported work hours ($F = 9.01$, $p = 0.001$) and semester hours taken ($F = 3.49$, $p = 0.009$) had differences in total job stress than lower reported work hours and semester hours taken. The effect sizes for work hours ranged from 9.7 to 16.9 in total stress score between fewest work hours and most work hours. For semester hours, effect sizes ranged from 11.8 to 16.4 in total stress score between fewest semester hours taken and most semester hours taken. Overall, the effect sizes for income, work hours, and semester hours were moderate. No significant GPA relationships in job stress were found at a .05 level of significance.

Discussion

The results suggest that for some students having a job adds more stress to their lives, increases exhaustion levels, and interferes with school responsibilities. In addition, certain job characteristics such as income, having a job unrelated to major, and having an off-campus job were all related to higher stress levels. Additionally, stress levels seemed to differ among working students depending on their job characteristics and number of semester hours taken.

These findings can have serious implications for students transitioning to college life as well as student retention. For those students transitioning to college life, having a demanding job may interfere with the ability to attend college functions outside the

classroom. In addition, having jobs that add more stress to students' lives can create strain in course performance, and having to keep a stressful or high-demanding job in order to pay tuition may influence students to drop out of school, skip semesters, or reduce course loads in order to hold easier, less stressful jobs. These actions may have serious effects on student retention. Overall, students having those job characteristics related to high stress may be at risk for poor college transition and possible drop-out.

With time, student personnel may be able to identify which jobs are most stressful for students, in turn providing students with important job selection information. This may also encourage student personnel to develop and make accessible to working college students a list of available jobs in the community or on campus which are more suited for the students' major and/or course schedules.

Administering instruments such as the JSM-CS can provide student personnel with an assessment of job-related characteristics such as the employed student's salary, work hours, and types of jobs. These characteristics, in combination with general demographics such as number of semester hours taken can help college professionals ascertain what impact the employed student's job may have on their college experience and retention. Information gathered from the JSM-CS may help academic advisors of students with jobs, classroom instructors who have students in their classes who work, college recruiters attempting to identify future students who have to work to attend college, guidance counselors who help new students adjust to the expectations of the college experience, administrators, and faculty for the purposes of course scheduling and possibly curriculum development.

The results of the current study are limited to a small, convenience sample of students. However, results indicated that job characteristics differed in their relation to stress levels. The JSM-CS needs to be administered to a greater number and more representative employed college student population. This will be beneficial to gain a clearer understanding of employed student issues and the relationship between job characteristics and stress level. Moreover, the JSM-CS is just one tool that can assist student affairs personnel, psychologists, and counselors in reaching out to employed students to understand not only job stress, but other job-related issues as well. Hopefully, this strategy of college job stress assessment will provide insight into problems with college transition and retention.

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TABLE 1

Item Response Frequencies for JSM-CS©

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
I consider my job to be stressful.	5.8%	26.0%	42.2%	18.2%	7.8%
My college classes are more stressful than my job.	1.9	7.8	23.4	31.8	35.1
My job schedule interferes with my class schedule.	30.5	22.7	31.8	11.0	3.9
My job interferes with my studying for exams.	7.8	22.1	38.3	26.0	5.8
My job affects my grades.	16.9	30.5	35.7	13.0	3.9
I arrange my job schedule around my class schedule.	53.2	24.0	11.0	2.6	9.1
My job takes such a toll on my energy, I cannot enjoy my leisure time.	17.5	27.9	33.1	16.2	5.2
I consider my job rewarding.	18.2	16.2	42.2	15.6	7.8
The physical work environment at my job is crowded.	16.2	29.9	27.3	20.1	6.5
My job is more stressful than the classes I take at college.	28.1	28.8	29.4	10.5	3.3
My life would be less stressful if I did not have to work and go to college at the same time.	3.2	12.3	24.0	17.5	42.9
There is discrimination in my job.	40.3	31.2	17.5	7.1	3.9
There is time for relaxation or breaks on my job.	13.6	22.1	39.6	16.9	7.8
I arrange my class schedule around my job schedule.	24.7	14.3	19.5	19.5	22.1
My job interferes with my completing class assignments.	22.1	29.9	33.1	10.4	4.5
There is a chance for personal or professional growth in my job.	13.6	18.8	27.3	32.5	7.8
I would continue working at the job I now have even if I did not need to pay for college.	24.0	17.5	18.2	14.9	25.3
The work environment at my job is noisy.	7.1	19.5	40.9	15.6	16.9
The physical demands of my job are excessive (heavy lifting, excessive standing/walking).	15.6	20.1	20.8	19.5	24.0
The pace at which I have to work is too fast.	12.3	31.8	33.8	13.0	9.1
I am physically exhausted when I get home from work.	11.0	19.5	34.4	24.0	11.0
I keep interested in my job because of its complexity.	6.5	14.3	36.4	30.5	12.3
I feel I may lose my job.	53.2	30.5	12.3	2.6	1.3
I leave my job each day feeling burned out.	8.4	39.0	33.1	10.4	9.1
The job requirements go beyond the range of my ability.	44.8	31.2	17.5	5.8	0.6