

# COLLEGE STUDENTS AND GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT WHILE ATTENDING SCHOOL: PORTRAIT OF A GROWING SOCIAL PHENOMENON

One of the most striking aspects in the evolution of Quebec's youth since 1980 is the sudden increase in the number of students who are gainfully employed while attending school (Bonin, 2007; Gendron & Hamel, 2004). Whether they are attending high school, CEGEP or university, most students are involved in a dual reality of working and studying at the same time. To gain a better appreciation of the evolution seen in college students, consider that, at the beginning of the 1980s, fewer than one in five students worked during the school year. By the end of that decade, the proportion had doubled. Then, at the beginning of the year 2000, the percentage rose above the 60% threshold. Today seven out of ten students work and that applies to both boys and girls. And, based on the averages that we have calculated, these students devote more hours to working than they do to studying outside of class.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the main characteristics of this social phenomenon occurring in the college network and how it relates to academic success. Intervention parameters that promote academic success with a view to reconciling working and studying are also presented. These suggestions draw on the main results of a recent study on gainful employment and academic success (Roy, Bouchard & Turcotte, 2008) conducted over a three-year period (2005-2008) throughout the entire college network with a sample group of 1,729 students from 51 public and private colleges. This research used a mixed methodology that included quantitative (survey questionnaire) and qualitative (discussion group) approaches.

## OVERALL PICTURE

Overall, 72% of students are gainfully employed while attending college: they average 17 hours of work per week. Table 1 shows the distribution of students based on the number of hours devoted to employment during the school year. The table indicates that almost 30% of students enrolled in college do not have paying jobs while attending school. It also reveals that, on average, students spend 17 hours gainfully employed. Added to full-time college studies, an average of 17 hours of work per week translates into a considerable investment of time.

As it turns out, college students already have a pretty full schedule as can be seen in Table 2 which is based on students enrolled at Cégep de Sainte-Foy.

By totalling the number of hours spent in class, those spent studying outside of class and those spent on gainful employment, we get a weekly average of 50 hours.

This corresponds the amount of time that college students devote to their studies and to work on a weekly basis; and this is in addition to time spent relaxing, eating, sleeping, etc. These data also put to rest the myth of the lazy college student, as have other studies such as that of Marshall (2007) which was based on Canadian adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age.

Close to half of college students (46%) work during their studies in order to increase their independence (financial and independence from their parents, mainly). This motive supersedes all others. One in five students with jobs say they are working to survive. Generally speaking the students in this group are older, they sometimes have family responsibilities and they receive little or no financial support from parents for their studies.

College students generally work in low-paying jobs – *McJobs* (Roy, 2008) – mainly in the retail and restaurant sectors (more than 90% of the jobs inventoried). In general, the students value their work.

Even if students in the large majority (82%) consider that their work has little or nothing to do with their college education, they still believe that working helps them to develop certain skills and competencies that complement their college training. Some of the skills mentioned include a better ability to manage stress, to adapt to various situations, to communicate more effectively, to develop a sense of responsibility, to assert themselves, to achieve greater personal discipline and to acquire a variety of technical skills, etc.

Finally, work is a place for socializing that students value and which, according to most, provides them with much personal satisfaction.



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## ► GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

There is no doubt that being gainfully employed while attending school can have a tangible influence on students' scholastic progress. This influence is not a one-way street. For instance, gainful employment in small doses can encourage students to commit to their studies, while large doses can have a negative effect on both academic success and persistence in studies, as can be seen in Table 3.

This table allows us to make two observations. Based on students' school averages, being employed while attending school is not contra-indicated in and of itself. Indeed, the highest level of academic success is found among those who work between one and four hours per week. On the other hand, those working 25 hours or more per week are less assured of academic success.

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Keeping in mind the impact that this 25-hour per week threshold has on academic success, we took a closer look at the profile of the students in this category. Many variables that characterize this group of students are negatively associated with academic success. Compared to others, these students feel that they receive less financial and moral support from their parents for pursuing their studies; they tend to be more dependent on a job as their main source of revenue; they state more often that working has a negative impact on their studies; they have less

interest in their studies; it is more important for them to earn money quickly; they must work harder to survive; they also believe that college is not a stimulating environment for them; and they experience more problems in school.

**Table 1**

### DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BASED ON THE NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK IN GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT WHILE ATTENDING SCHOOL

N° of hours	N° of Students	% of Students
Do not work	511	29.5%
Between 1 and 4 hours	32	1.8%
Between 5 and 9 hours	167	9.7%
Between 10 and 14 hours	247	14.3%
Between 15 and 19 hours	311	18.0%
Between 20 and 24 hours	264	15.3%
25 hours or more	193	11.2%
No answer	4	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1729</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2<sup>1</sup>**

### AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS PER WEEK SPENT STUDYING OUTSIDE OF CLASS, ATTENDING CLASS AND WORKING, AMONG CÉGEP DE SAINTE-FOY STUDENTS

Average N° of Hours Spent Working during the School Year		N° of Hours Spent Studying Outside of Class	N° of hours Spent Attending Classes <sup>2</sup>	Total Hours/Week Devoted to these Three Activities
CATEGORY	AVERAGE			
No time	0	13.2	23.4	36.6
Between 1 and 9 hours	7.2	13.5	24.2	44.9
Between 10 and 19 hours	14.0	13.7	22.8	50.5
20 hours and more	23.0	10.6	22.3	55.9

<sup>1</sup> Table 2 represents a total of 96 students attending Cégep de Sainte-Foy.

<sup>2</sup> This represents the numbers of course hours that students are registered for at Cégep de Sainte-Foy.



Table 3

SCHOOL AVERAGE FOR STUDENTS BASED ON NUMBER OF HOURS SPENT WORKING PER WEEK

N° of Hours Spent Working per Week	School Average All Respondents <sup>3</sup>
0	76.1%
1-4 hours	80.9%
5-9 hours	77.6%
10-14 hours	77.5%
15-19 hours	76.2%
20-24 hours	74.9%
25 hours or +	71.5%
<b>General Average</b>	<b>75.9%</b>

A careful analysis of the data, specifically the academic averages of students who work 20 to 24 hours per week during their studies, makes a case for considering 20 hours of gainful employment per week to be a threshold not to be exceeded, since the risk of academic failure and dropping out of school increases progressively once this threshold is reached.

To digress: this study presents statistical averages. It sounds the alarm at 20 hours and more of gainful employment per week. However, for some students – especially those in their first session or weaker students – even 10 to 15 hours of gainful employment per week can sometimes be too demanding while others are able to balance everything while working 30 hours a week. In other words, the 20-hour threshold should be considered to be a reference point; each student’s personal reality must also be taken into account.

The first priority for college students is their studies. For the majority, being gainfully employed is taken to be a “useful” component of their academic path. For a minority of students, work is more important than studies due to the immediate benefits that it produces, specifically as regards access to consumer goods and entertainment products.

Depending on their situation, students adopt various strategies to reconcile work and studies. Various factors will influence the balance sought between work and studies: the number of course hours per week, the number of hours spent working, the demands of the academic program, the possibility of doing school assignments at work, the type of work schedule (flexible schedule, night shift, etc.), not to mention the student’s values and the amount of financial support provided by the parents. With regard to strategies for reconciling work and studies, there are many options: taking fewer courses, pressuring employers to reduce the number of work hours or to improve working conditions, reducing leisure time and sleeping time, better management of time at work and time spent travelling to and from work, etc.

<sup>3</sup> This represents the average of cumulative school results on the student’s report card.

There is however a marked difference between students who live with their parents and those who do not. The former work basically to provide themselves with more “comforts” while attending school, while the latter are forced to develop strategies for reconciling work and studies in order to survive. Interviews conducted with students reinforced this dual image of students living different realities with regard to gainful employment and college studies.

INTERVENTION PARAMETERS

The proposed intervention parameters for promoting the reconciliation of work and studies with a view to academic success were derived from three sources: the students themselves, through the feelings they expressed during group interviews; the views of involved professionals in the four participating colleges<sup>4</sup>; and experiences drawn from the college network.

Exchanges with college professionals enabled us to identify a prerequisite for intervention parameters, namely the existence of a shared college culture: a culture that believes in valuing success and the world of knowledge and one that challenges all those involved (students, college personnel, parents, etc.). According to professionals working in the field, it is this type of general framework that is conducive to generating reflection on possible interventions in an efficient and lasting manner.

Two other fundamental elements were raised by intervening professionals during our research: the importance of

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promoting student commitment to studies and the need to make them aware of the potential influence of gainful employment on academic success. More specifically, based on data collected during our study, we retained five intervention paths.

The first deals with the possibility that work placements could be partially remunerated. Following interviews on the advantages and disadvantages of this option, we believe that a work committee could be set up to explore this path in greater detail.

The second intervention path proposes that we resort more often to tutorials between teachers and students to keep the latter better informed and to make the students aware of the influence that gainful employment can have on academic progress.

A third intervention path deals with setting up a budgeting consultation service in colleges. This service would support students in establishing priorities and eventually reducing the number of hours spent working.

A fourth intervention path calls on colleges to develop strategies to encourage parents to be more active participants in students' academic success, keeping in mind that our study confirms that parents do have a tangible influence, especially when it comes to persevering with studies.

A final intervention parameter deals with employers and the college's role in the community. The study recommends that colleges identify means of sensitizing employers to their potential contribution to students' academic success.

Given that communities are highly diversified, the participants are not proposing the development of a unique model. However, the example provided by CREPAS (*Conseil régional de prévention de l'abandon scolaire*) in the Saguenay region demonstrates the possibility of fruitful collaboration between the educational milieu and employers for the purpose of promoting academic success.

[...] the proportion of college students with marks below 70% seems to increase significantly once the 20-hour threshold is reached.

## CONCLUSION

Gainful employment in itself is not an enemy of academic success. In small doses, it can even have a positive effect on studies. However, according to our results, in large doses of 20 hours per week or more it can become an obstacle to academic achievement. This is what our research reveals, consistent with other studies done on the question (Bonin, 2007; Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). In fact, a study by the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (2008) concludes that the proportion of college students with marks below 70% seems to increase significantly once the 20-hour threshold is reached.

As it turns out, more than a quarter of college students (27%) devote 20 or more hours per week to a job. Based on our study, these students are potentially at risk academically. Furthermore, nobody knows whether we have actually reached a plateau for this trend or if it will continue growing as it has over the last 20 years. Another interesting result is the fact that the average number of hours each student spends working (17 hours per week) is already significantly more than the hours spent studying outside class (12 hours per week). As we can see, having a job takes up a lot of time in a student's daily life.

From a general perspective of having students focus on their studies, we believe that colleges must act in a preventive manner on this problem of reconciling work and studies in order to help more students achieve academic success. We hope that the proposed intervention paths help to fuel reflection in colleges in order to better orient our actions directed at helping students. ◆

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