



SYNTHESIS REPORT

Study on Paid Work in the College Network

Work-Study Balance among College Students : a Changing Paradigm

PAREA Study

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INTRODUCTION

The problematics of working during college studies constitutes a rapidly growing social phenomenon. While two out of six students held paid employment during the school year before the 1980s, this ratio is now seven out of ten. This phenomenon leads us to examine the effects of a “paid work–study” balance on academic performance and perseverance.

We’ve chosen two analysis axes in order to explore the problematics of college students’ paid work. The first is based on a survey using a questionnaire carried out throughout the college network (public and private). It is phase 1 of the research. This study is aimed at globally documenting the social reality of college students and specifically that of paid work during their studies in connection with their academic pathway. The second analysis axis involves a more in-depth examination, both quantitatively and qualitatively (respectively phases 2 and 3 of the research), of the “work–study” balance based on a college student sample in four CEGEPs : Ahuntsic, Saint-Jérôme, Sainte-Foy and the Centre d’études collégiales in Charlevoix, connected with the CEGEP in Jonquière. We decided that these two axes were necessary and complementary for a more complete analysis of the problematics of employment among college student during the school year.

Overall, the current research is aimed at understanding and explaining the “paid work and study” duality with respect to academic success. Additionally, the survey aims to supply stakeholders in the college network with information to contribute to a reflection that would enable them to support students in their academic life, whereas their employment occupies an important place in their personal agenda.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We have retained the social ecology model to make our initial paradigm operational. It brings together the reflection on paid work in connection with academic success in a general context of the rapport between the student and society : to what degree can this rapport condition the academic path of the student and how? In fact, the matter of paid work presents itself as the focal point of the existing interface between the young person and society. The spheres of influence are numerous and interfere with the universe of college studies.

The social ecology model offers two analysis levels to examine the student/society relationship. The first involves categorizing the different spheres where the student evolves through his/her different environments, such as family, college, work environment, network of friends in the community or town, etc. The second level is aimed at the complex interaction that ties the college student to his/her different environments; for example, how is the student able to arrive at a balance between the demands of college and those related to paid work during the school year.

In this general framework, the study is aimed at highlighting the synergy that exists between the student and his/her different environments. It is exactly the perspective that we've developed when examining paid work in connection to academic success in the college environment.

OBJECTIVES

More formally, here are the research objectives :

Overall objective

Understand and explain the “work–study” balance with respect to academic success based on an ecological approach and within a perspective of intervention in the college environment.

Specific objectives

- Develop an overall picture of college students and of the reality of paid work during studies.
- Measure the impact of paid work on academic success.
- Determine the associations between paid work and the other factors of the study based on a social ecology perspective.
- Carry out a comparative analysis of the results based on the sex of the students and their study area (pre-university and technical).
- Identify the dynamics and strategies retained by the students to balance study and paid work and pinpoint the signification elements that they attach to them.
- Target the interventions and courses of action aimed at academic success within the context of a “work – study” balance.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology has two components: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative component of the study can be subdivided into two parts. The first part, carried out in phase 1 of the research (2005/2006), deals with a survey using a questionnaire, addressed to a sample of college students who are representative of the whole college network, both public and private. The purpose of this survey is to paint an overall picture of the reality of college students in Quebec and a specific portrait of the problematic of paid work during studies and that of academic success in connection with paid work.

A second part, carried out in phase 2 of the study (2006/2007), involves a more detailed examination of the problematic of paid work in the wake of trends observed in a national survey. In fact, the results of this study brought to light some trends that appeared to be of interest to us for further examination. This examination was carried out in four participating colleges in phases 2 and 3.

In addition to the two survey questionnaires of phases 1 and 2 of the study, a data bank of the colleges' internal system allowed us to match information concerning certain personal characteristics of these colleges' students and their academic pathway. The two sources of information (survey questionnaires and system files of the establishments) were brought together to facilitate the analysis and processing of information¹. It must be mentioned that the study is transversal, in other words, the students filled out a questionnaire in the spring of 2006 on one single occasion, for the study carried out throughout the colleges, and in the fall of 2007, for the one carried out in the four participating colleges.

The two survey questionnaires (shortened for the colleges as a whole and detailed for the four participating colleges) were subdivided into seven sections: 1) The students' personal characteristics. 2) College as a life environment. 3) Family and social networks. 4) Personal well-being. 5) The value system. 6) The socio-economic situation. 7) The universe of paid work (participating in the job market, type of employment, number of work hours, degree of satisfaction vis-à-vis work conditions, connection with studies, life habits, consumption, quality of relationships with the employer and employees, motives related to paid work, method for organizing time in daily life, employment and social network, etc).

1. Student numbers were used to link the two data banks. Only the colleges' administrative services can have access to the students' nominal information. The confidentiality of the data is therefore guaranteed.

Based on the tenets of the social ecological model, for the purposes of this study, four types of environment were retained :

- The college as a life environment.
- The family network and the social network.
- The job market.
- The value system.

Information on each of these components were brought together in order to evaluate the interdependency that exists between the four environments of the ecological model as well as with academic success indicators.

In the analysis plan, two indicators were used to qualify the student's academic success : cumulative academic performance and academic perseverance measured by a question on dropping out in the two survey questionnaires².

For the component of the survey concerning the colleges as a whole, 1729 students spread over 51 colleges completed the questionnaire. Various statistical analyses were carried out using the research material (chi-square test, factorial analyses, univariate and multivariate analyses).

The qualitative component comes into play in phase 3 of the study (2007-2008) to take over from the two survey questionnaires. It is aimed at understanding – in the Weberian sense of the term – the reality of students involved in balancing “paid work and studies” by exploring the dynamics and strategies of students in their daily life to organize their work/study space and by translating the meaning and significance that they attach to both their paid activities and their academic pathway. Here, the student is viewed within the perspective of actor, in a Tourainian sense; in other words, an actor who is carrier of meaning and who takes – or wants to take – the means necessary to give direction to their life as a college student.

On an operational level, we proceeded using the focus groups method with a sample (90 students), selected at random from those working 10 hours or more per week during the fall 2007 session. We retained the thematic method for the purposes of condensing, coding and analyzing the qualitative material (Bardin, 1991; Paillé and Mucchielli, 2003). Interpretive analyses of the interview material were carried out in view of isolating the dominant thematic.

2. To qualify academic perseverance, the question was the following : “Are you currently considering abandoning your college studies this year?” Three answers were possible : 1. Not at all. 2. Occasionally I think about it. 3) I'm seriously considering it. The students who answered that they were “seriously” or “occasionally” thinking about it were grouped together as a drop-out risk category.

RESULTS

Here are the highlights of the study :

- 72 % of the students were engaged in employment during their college studies; they dedicated, on average, 17 hours per week to paid work; in comparison, they dedicated 12 hours to their studies, on a weekly basis, outside the classroom.
- Paid work, in and of itself, during the school year is not inappropriate when combined with studies. A small amount of work can be a positive encouragement factor from a scholastic point of view.
- Starting at 20 paid hours a week it becomes an obstacle to success, reaching a high with the group that commits 25 hours or more to employment.
- By totalling the hours spent in class, those spent studying outside of class as well as those dedicated to paid work, the average week of a college student who has a job is 50 hours.
- The jobs held by students are *Mcjob*-type positions, primarily located in the retail sector and the food service industry (over 90% of the jobs surveyed).
- Half of college students (46%) are employed during their studies in order to increase their independence (financial and with respect to their parents). This motive overrides all others.
- One student in five who has a job says that they work in order to sustain themselves. This student group is often older, sometimes has family responsibilities and benefits little or not at all from parental financial support for their studies.
- As far as college students are concerned, their studies are their priority. For most of them, paid work figures as a “utilitarian” element within the context of their academic pathway.
- The strategies that students adopt to balance work and study are varied and result from their individual circumstances. In particular, there is a marked split between students living with their parents and the others. The first group works to procure greater comfort during college, while the second is more constrained for reasons related to subsistence.
- In general, students enjoy working. They develop abilities and skills that are complimentary to their college training. Lastly, work is a socialization link.

Schematically, the following two tables reproduce an overall portrait of the time college students dedicate to paid work and their studies :

Table 1
Distribution of students based on the number of hours worked weekly within the framework of employment during studies

| No. of hours | No. of students | % of students |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Unemployed | 511 | 29.6 % |
| Between 1 and 4 hours | 32 | 1.9 % |
| 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 | 193 | 11.2 % |
| Total | 1725 | 100 % |

Table 2
Number of hours per week dedicated to studies outside the classroom, to course presence and employment among students at Cégep de Sainte-Foy³

| Average no. of hours working during the school year | | No. of study hours outside the classroom | No. of hours present in the classroom ⁴ | Total hours weekly dedicated to these three activities |
|---|---------|--|--|--|
| Category | Average | | | |
| Zero hours | 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 | 23.0 | 10.6 | 22.3 | 55.9 |

Regarding academic success, the following two tables provide a better appreciation of the relationship between paid work and studies :

3. In total, the table involves 96 students attending Cégep de Sainte-Foy.

4. It is the number of course hours for which the students at Cégep de Sainte-Foy have registered.

Table 3
Average grade of students based on the number of hours
dedicated weekly to employment, by sex

| No. of hours dedicated to employment per week | Average grade ⁵ | | |
|---|----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| | Female | Male | All of the respondents |
| Zero hours | 78\7 % | 73.2 % | 76.1 % |
| 1-4 hours | 82.0 % | 78.9 % | 80.9 % |
| 5-9 hours | 78.7 % | 75.3 % | 77.6 % |
| 10-14 hours | 79.0 % | 73.6 % | 77.5 % |
| 15-19 hours | 76.7 % | 75.2 % | 76.2 % |
| 20-24 hours | 75.9 % | 72.6 % | 74.9 % |
| 25+ hours | 72.9 % | 69.4 % | 71.5 % |
| Average grade | 77.3 % | 73.3 % | 75.9 % |

This table allows us to observe two things: based on the school grades of students, employment, in and of itself, during studies is not ill-advised. Those who achieved top grades were even among those working one to four hours a week.

However, starting at 25 hours a week the parameters are significantly modified. In light of the impact of the threshold of 25+ hours of paid work per week on academic achievement, we decided to examine the characteristics of these students more carefully.

5. It is the cumulative grade average from the student report card.

Table 4
Portrait of students engaged in 25+ hours of employment
per week during their studies⁶

| Rank | Compared to the other students, the student engaged in 25+hours of employment weekly during their studies : | P of chi ² ⁷ |
|------|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. | Is more likely to rely on employment as main source of income. | .0001 |
| 2. | Is older. | .0001 |
| 3. | Is more likely to feel that employment interferes with their studies. | .0001 |
| 4. | Has grades that are lower than average. | .0001 |
| 5. | Is less likely to feel that their parents support them financially. | .0001 |
| 6. | Is more likely to be employed in order to sustain themselves. | .0001 |
| 7. | Places more importance on earning money quickly. | .0003 |
| 8. | Receives less encouragement from their father for the pursuit of their studies. | .0005 |
| 9. | Is male. | .0005 |
| 10. | Is not in their first session. | .0007 |
| 11. | Experiences greater scholastic difficulties. | .0021 |
| 12. | Is less likely to be employed in order to experience the job market. | .0033 |
| 13. | Is less interested in their studies. | .0035 |
| 14. | Is less likely to view the college as a stimulating environment. | .0045 |
| 15. | Attaches less importance to their studies. | .0058 |
| 16. | Is more likely to consider the workload heavy. | .0077 |

Many variables that characterize this group of students are negatively associated with academic success. Furthermore, we must avoid any kind of “automatic” generalization that suggests that the risks of failure or drop-out are automatically higher when students cross this “rubicon” of 25 hours per week. This simply means that students, who bear other characteristics than those mentioned above, can achieve a “work and study” balance with 25+ hours of work per week without compromising their studies, while maintaining a relative balance in their student life. Alternately, students who combine some of the risk factors mentioned could be engaged in employment 20, 15 or even 10 hours a week and then find it an obstacle to their academic achievement and perseverance. But, overall, based on our results, it truly starts at this critical threshold of 25 hours weekly, combined with other factors mentioned above, that paid work can play a definite negative role in terms of the student’s academic trajectory. We could add that for some students the risk factors start to become felt at between 20 and 24 hours of paid work per week.

6. In the sample, the students engaged in 25+ hours of employment per week total 11.2 % of all students (N = 193).

7. Le P of chi² is ≤ .01. When the value of P is identical, the value of chi² is used to establish variable ranking.

INTERVENTION PARAMETERS

After consultation, within the framework of a group meeting with stakeholders from the four participating colleges (Ahuntsic, Saint-Jérôme, Saint-Foy and the Centre d'études collégiales in Charlevoix), five intervention parameters were identified to facilitate a “work – study” balance based on academic success.

The first concerns the matter of paid training periods. The study suggests that a work committee be established to explore the possibility of allowing paid training in the college environment.

The second suggests relying more on professor/student tutoring in order to inform and raise awareness among college students regarding the importance of the “paid work” factor in the pursuit of their studies.

A third recommends offering students a budget consultation service within the college. This service would provide better targeting of student priorities in order to eventually reduce the number of hours spent working.

A fourth invites colleges to develop strategies aimed at raising awareness among parents regarding the tangible role they play throughout their children’s academic pathway and to better contribute to their success.

The last parameter concerns employers. It highlights the interest the college has in finding the means to foster awareness among employers, over its territory, regarding their part in contributing to academic success, by establishing, for instance, a minimum framework of conditions aimed at preventing academic failure and drop-out.

CONCLUSION

In the study, certain findings came to light. Notably, the phenomenon of paid work during academic studies is not running out of steam; 72% of the college students are engaged in employment during their college studies and they dedicate an average of 17 hours a week to this employment. That’s quite a lot! Even more so when you consider that they dedicate 12 hours weekly to studying at home, that’s one and a half times less than the time allotted for paid work.

Another finding : by totalling the hours spent in class, those dedicated to studies and paid work, the average week of a working college student is 50 hours – before eating, sleeping, leisure, etc. This is also a sizeable number! These findings are in keeping with the social changes registered in this regard in our society where the hours spent working are increasingly encroaching upon the other aspects of the individual's social life.

Also, at 20 or more hours of work weekly, it starts to become a potential obstacle to academic achievement. However, we clearly saw that paid work is not, in and of itself, an enemy of the pursuit of studies. When a balanced approach is taken, it can even be an encouragement factor in the student's academic pathway. Without taking into consideration that, in general, college students enjoy working. It also allows them to develop skills and abilities that are complementary to their college training.

The strategies adopted by students to balance work and studies are varied. They are also largely tributary of their individual circumstances. Notably, the figures for college students who live with their parents and the others, who live outside the family home, are markedly different.

These different findings are in keeping with the social logic that already exists in society : transformation of the labour market, desynchronization of social time, ideals of productivity and consumption, valorization of personal autonomy, etc. And the college student does not live "beside" society : he/she has both feet in it and the mechanisms of socialization that exist outside of the college also influence the student's academic pathway, aspirations and his/her rapport with knowledge.

It is within this overall perspective that we feel that colleges must "reflect" on their success plan by factoring in certain important social factors, such as the reality of paid work during studies. Therefore, the recommendations put forth in this study can contribute to fuelling the reflection in colleges in order to better direct their approach with students in the context of the "work – studies" balance. Above all, it is what we hope will happen!