
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Student Employment: Work Habits and Impact

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

Students who attend UB work *a lot*. Nearly a third of incoming students plan to work more than 20 hours per week while enrolled. The purpose of the present study is to examine issues related to student employment. The results provide a description of students' work habits, their reasons for working, as well as the impact working has on their academic, social, and emotional lives.

Three focus groups were conducted to collect data from 27 *UB Advocates* (trained student volunteers). First, these students completed a paper survey about their working habits (e.g., hours worked, place of employment, items on which they spend their money). Then, they engaged in a focus group discussion in which they were asked about their reasons for working, as well as advantages and disadvantages of working while enrolled in college. An additional 43 *UB Advocates* who were unable to attend a focus group session participated by completing an on-line survey which contained questions parallel to those asked on the paper survey and in the focus groups discussions. The data presented here are from the 49 domestic undergraduate participants.

Based on these students' responses to our questions, we can conclude the following:

- Most of these students were working at the time the data were collected (59.2%), with nearly two-thirds of those working being employed on-campus.
- Most of the participants who work have a single, part-time job. However, five participants report working more than 20 hours per week during the semester, and six participants report working more than one job.
- Students tend to work more hours during the summer and during breaks, especially if they are not working during the semester.
- Only four participants report not working at all during their enrollment at UB.
- There does not appear to be a clear relationship between receipt of financial aid and working, with those students receiving loans and scholarships more likely to report working for more hours per week.
- Most students use their earnings to cover text books and food, with only a small proportion being responsible for all of their educational costs.
- Students tend to be most responsible for expenses related to entertainment, clothing, and their cars.
- The two primary advantages of working (and also the primary reasons that students give for working) are money and skill development or experience.
- Students recognize that working limits the time they have available for other things, such as completing academic work, socializing, and spending time with family.
- Students who work see themselves as more stressed and more tired than their peers who do not work.

BRIEF: Student Employment: Work Habits and Impact

Based on survey results from incoming freshmen and transfer students and from anecdotal evidence, it appears that students at UB work *a lot*. For example, just over 30.0% of fall 2007 entering freshmen reported there is some chance they will work full-time during college. Nearly half of them had worked more than 10 hours per week during their last year of high school, with 11.7% working over 20 hours per week. Transfer students are even more likely to plan to work (85.7%), with 37.8% planning to work more than 20 hours per week. This study examines issues related to student employment, including students' reasons for working, as well as the number of hours they are working and what impact working has on their lives.

Participants and Procedures

We conducted 3 focus groups with 27 UB Advocates¹. UB Advocates who were unable to participate in focus groups were given the opportunity to participate via a web survey (43). In all, 70 students provided feedback. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (46) are female, and 23 have been UB Advocates for at least one year. Over three-quarters (57) of the participants are undergraduates, with 13 freshmen, 14 sophomores, 11 juniors, and 19 seniors. Thirty were enrolled at other institutions prior to enrolling at UB. Of the 50 domestic students, 35 identify as white, 2 as African American, 5 as Asian, 1 as Hispanic, and 7 as other or unknown. The international students come from Bangladesh (1), Canada (2), China (2), India (7), Korea (2), Malaysia (2), Nigeria (2), Rwanda (1), and Somalia (1). The schools/colleges represented are Architecture and Planning (2), Arts and Sciences (22), Engineering (9), Education (5), Management (14), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (8), Nursing (4), Pharmacy (3), Public Health (2), and Undergraduate Education (1). On average, the undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.26, and the graduate/professional participants began with a 3.43.

When students arrived at the focus group location, they were asked to complete an anonymous, 11-item survey containing questions about their employment situations, including how they spend the money they earn. During the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss reasons for working, as well as advantages and disadvantages of working while enrolled at UB. Those students who completed the web survey responded to the same questions as those who participated in the focus groups. Only data from domestic undergraduates ($N=49$) are included in the analyses described below.

Results

Students' Work Habits and Expenses

Nearly two-thirds (29) of the domestic undergraduate participants are working during the current semester, with 17 working on-campus, 10 working off-campus, and 2 holding jobs both on- and off-campus. Most of these students (25) have one job, but five report working two jobs,

and one student has three jobs. On average, these students work 14 hours per week ($SD=8.6$), with 14 working 10 or fewer hours per week, 12 working between 10 and 20 hours per week, and 5 working more than 20 hours per week. Three-quarters of the students (38) worked during the semester break or during the previous summer, with 19 indicating they worked only during the summer, one working only during the break, and 18 working during both the summer and during the break. Students worked more hours during the summer ($mean=32, SD=12.8$) and more during the break ($mean=16, SD=16.6$) than during the semester. In fact, 28 students worked more than 20 hours per week during summer, and 10 students worked more than 20 hours per week during break, as compared to the 5 who worked more than 20 hours during the current semester. Only four students reported not working all while enrolled at UB.

As shown in Table 1, there does not appear to be a clear relationship between working and receipt of financial aid. Those who do not receive any financial aid tend to work fewer hours in the current semester than do those receiving scholarships only or loans and scholarships, but they are slightly more likely to work year-round. Interestingly, students who receive both loans and scholarships are more likely to report working more than 10 hours per week during the semester, and nearly a third of them work year-round, suggesting that their financial needs are greater than the amount received in scholarships and loans. In the other three financial aid groups, most students report working year-round, as well, and are more likely to work part-time during the semester if they work.

Table 1: Working Patterns and Receipt of Financial Aid

| Working Groups | No Financial Aid | Loans Only | Scholarships Only | Loans and Scholarships |
|--|------------------|------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Hours Worked During Current Semester</i> | | | | |
| Not Currently Working | 4 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| 10 or Fewer Hours | 6 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| 11-20 Hours | 1 | 4 | 1 | 6 |
| More than 20 Hours | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| <i>Yearly Working Pattern</i> | | | | |
| Do Not Work | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Work During School Year Only | 1 | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| Work Summer/Breaks Only | 2 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Work Year Round | 6 | 5 | 5 | 6 |

Tables 2 and 3 show the types of educational and non-educational costs students are most likely to cover based on the number of hours they work during the semester. In terms of educational costs, students seem to be most responsible for purchasing text books and food. Among the non-educational costs, students appear to be most responsible for their own entertainment costs, clothing purchases, and automobile-related expenses. Contrary to what might be expected, students who work up to 20 hours per week during the semester are more likely to report responsibility for educational and non-educational costs than are the students who work more than 20 hours per week.

Table 2: Educational Costs Covered by Students

(Frequencies indicate the number of students who say they cover most/all of the associated cost for each item).

| Educational Cost | Total | Not Working | 10 or Fewer Hours | 11-20 Hours | More than 20 Hours |
|------------------|-------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Tuition | 6 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| Fees | 9 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| Books | 21 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 4 |
| Housing | 10 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 1 |
| Food | 21 | 4 | 7 | 9 | 1 |

Table 3: Non-Educational Costs Covered by Students

(Frequencies indicate the number of students who say they cover most of the associated cost for each item).

| Non-Educational Cost | Total | Not Working | 10 or Fewer Hours | 11-20 Hours | More than 20 Hours |
|--|-------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Automobile Expenses | 17 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 4 |
| Cable, Satellite TV or Radio, Internet | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Cell Phone Service | 10 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| Clothing | 26 | 4 | 10 | 9 | 3 |
| Entertainment | 31 | 7 | 10 | 10 | 4 |
| Health/Fitness Clun Membership | 7 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Land Phone Line | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Mass Transportation | 7 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Needs of Dependents | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |

Students' Reasons for Working

Based on the quantitative results, it appears there is a core group of students who are using funds from a variety of sources, including working, loans, and scholarships, to help cover the costs of college, as well as the costs of living while enrolled in college. However, these students are not the ones working full-time, with nearly half of them working between 10 and 20 hours per week. Information from the focus group discussions and from the open-ended items on the web survey sheds further light on the reasons why these students are working.

When asked directly why they work while they are enrolled in college, students primarily offer financial reasons. Money, or some financial aspect of working, was mentioned 48 times in the focus groups discussions and the open-ended survey items. Most commonly, students want to help pay for some of their expenses (17), which include transportation costs, books, food, cell phones, etc. Beyond this, seven students mentioned that they wanted to become financially independent or self-supportive to avoid placing a burden on their family members. Seven students mentioned working to earn additional spending money, while three expressed a desire to decrease loan amounts or minimize the need for loans. Only three students indicated that they

needed to work to fund college, and four mentioned working to survive (e.g., meet basic needs or those of immediate family members).

Experience was the second most frequently mentioned reason students offered for working during the academic semester, mentioned 20 times. In 15 of these cases, the students were focused on gaining work experience in general. However, two students mentioned that they were learning skills related specifically to future careers. Three students emphasized the importance of learning people skills and networking. Other reasons students provided for working in college are that they like it or it is fun (4), it keeps them busy (1), and it means less time for “slacking off” (1).

For the few students who choose not to work during the academic semester, the reason stated most frequently was related to time: these students prefer to spend their time on their studies and rigorous class loads (5), extracurricular activities (1), or in non-paid research opportunities (1). One student was unable to fit work into a non-routine course schedule, and one student was interested in work-study but was not awarded it in the financial aid package.

To further examine the importance of working in students’ lives, we asked them what would happen if they suddenly no longer had a paycheck. Six students indicated that the loss of the paycheck would be a disaster, for such reasons as being unable to make ends meet, losing their homes, or defaulting on credit card bills. Eleven students indicated that losing their paycheck would have a negative impact on school, with eight of them stating that they would need to drop out. Many students were proactive, however, indicating that they would search for alternate sources of income (e.g., ask family members or friends or seek a new job, 26) or try to have a lower standard of living by limiting their activities and purchases (42). Eight students indicated that not much in their lives would really change since they don’t rely very heavily on their own income to cover their expenses.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working while Enrolled

In addition to the paycheck, students see additional advantages of working while in school. The most frequently mentioned advantage of working is skill development, which was mentioned 34 times. In addition to gaining valuable work experience and learning real-world skills, students can learn how to manage their time and their money better when they are working. Social/interpersonal factors were mentioned 11 times: students see working as providing the opportunity to meet new people, socialize, and make new friends.

The primary disadvantage of working while enrolled in school relates to the time issue, mentioned 49 times. Students see working as a barrier to studying, socializing, and getting involved in campus activities. Working also takes an emotional and a physical toll (mentioned 11 times). Students who work perceive themselves to feel more stress and to be more tired than they perceive their non-working peers to be. Those who are not currently working see the lack of money to be the primary disadvantage of not working, but they value the amount of time they have for studying and other activities, and they feel they are better able to focus on their studies than are students who work.

Although there are definite advantages for working on campus, such as not needing a car, having a shorter commute, and having a more flexible work schedule, there are also some disadvantages. These disadvantages include jobs that are lower in pay and limited in scope, fewer opportunities for networking, and limited opportunities for resumé-building as compared to off-campus employment opportunities.

Conclusions

In spite of the fact that most of the undergraduates who participated in this study work during the semester, only a small proportion of them need to do so to survive and/or fund their educations (7). These same students indicate it would be a “disaster” if they suddenly had no paycheck. However, most participants report working because they want to limit the amount of money they get from other places, such as from their families and from loans. In addition, having their own source of income helps them to achieve some degree of freedom and independence in their lives. Most of these students in this second group feel confident that they could turn to their families or take out loans if they suddenly no longer had a paycheck.

The second most important reason students offer for working is for experience. Not only does working in college provide work experience that can be used to build a resumé, but it can help students learn skills that will be important to future careers. Most also recognize the value of working for providing important networking opportunities and for helping them develop time management skills. Interestingly, the same two reasons students give for why they are working coincide with the two major advantages of working: money and skill development. Students also recognize disadvantages of working, however. The primary disadvantage relates to time, and all of them recognize that working interferes with the amount of time they can devote to other things, such as their studies, socializing, and spending time with family. Students who work also see themselves as more stressed and more tired than their peers who do not work.

In conclusion, most of the undergraduates who participated in this study choose to work for extra money and for the experience. For most of them, not working would not drastically alter their lives, but they do so in spite of the disadvantages. From this study, it is not possible to determine if there are additional disadvantages of working, such as taking more years to graduate and lower grades.

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¹ UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.