

When earning is beneficial for learning: The relation of employment and leisure activities to academic outcomes

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Abstract

The present study investigates the joint effect of the quantity and quality of out-of-school activities (i.e., employment and leisure) on academic outcomes (i.e., well-being, study attitude, and academic performance) among 230 undergraduates. A series of hierarchical regression analyses show that spending too much time in both employment and leisure activities has negative relations with undergraduates' academic outcomes. Work–study interference fully mediated the effect of time engagement in student employment on students' reported well-being. These findings support a conflict perspective on multiple role engagement. However, results also show positive effects of activities depending on job demand and autonomy and level of autonomous motivation to engage in these activities. We conclude that out-of-school activities can be beneficial for students' academic outcomes and preparation for the labor market when perceived as relevant for their academic study and performed in a balanced, autonomous way.

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1. Introduction

After-school engagements in employment and leisure have become major activities in students' lives. One of the most noticeable trends in employment has been employers' rising expectations of newly recruited graduates. Not surprisingly, students are strongly encouraged to gain work experience well before graduation to facilitate school-to-work transition and to gain a competitive advantage on the labor market (Davies, 2000). In the United States, for instance, an estimated 80% of students are employed at some point before they leave high school, with 46% working more than 20 hours a week; the estimated number of working undergraduates ranges from 24% to 64% (Little, Harvey, Moon, Marlow-Hayne, & Pierce, 2002; Zierold, Garman, & Anderson, 2005). Student employment, however, has also been associated with lower study investment, lower academic performance, and greater psychological and somatic distress (Steinberg & Dornbush, 1991). This

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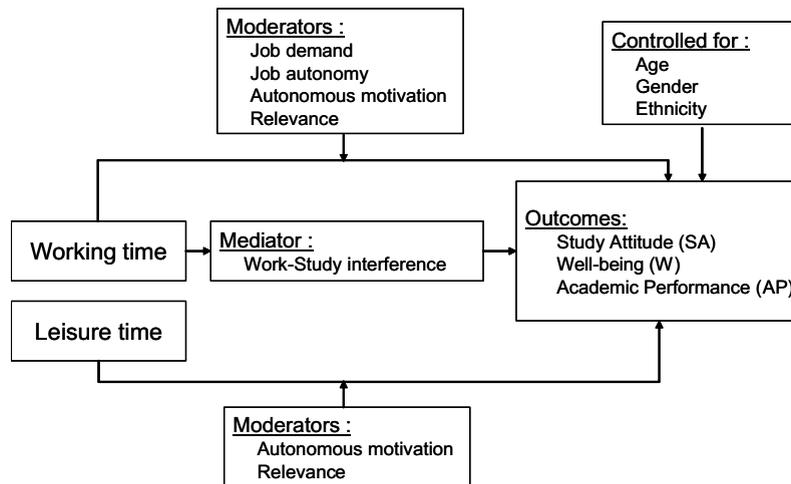


Fig. 1. Overview of the hypothesized relations.

may—paradoxically—*impair* career opportunities since graduates are also assessed by educational achievements (Rynes, Orlitsky, & Bretz, 1997).

In this study, we investigated how employment and extracurricular activities relate to undergraduates' academic outcomes. Whereas previous studies mainly investigated the *quantity* of engagement, the present research focused also on the *quality* of this engagement. Using theories of job design, role-conflict, and motivation, we investigated whether (a) type of activity (work vs. leisure), (b) work–study conflict, (c) quality of work, and (d) motivation to engage in activities, may explain the relation of time investment to undergraduates' study attitude (SA), well-being (W), and academic performance (AP).

The Dynamics of Action theory (Atkinson & Birch, 1970) posits that any change from one particular activity to another expresses a change in the strength of underlying behavioral tendencies, which interfere with the engagement and persistence in that particular activity. According to this theory, students' engagement in one particular activity (e.g., studying) will depend on their motivation and interest in alternative activities (e.g., working or relaxing). For instance, Lens, Lacante, Vansteenkiste, and Herrera (2005) showed that undergraduates' working hours were inversely related to their study motivation, study attitude, and academic achievement; effects were most negative when students worked excessively long hours.

Much like the Dynamics of Action theory, the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) posits that people want to conserve the quantity and quality of their resources (i.e., time, energy): While performing multiple tasks, one may lose resources, which in turn may lead to underperformance and distress (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). The conflict perspective on multiple role engagement, as suggested by both of these theories, predicts a linear, negative relation between the quantity of engagement in out-of-school activities and study attitude, performance and well-being. This negative effect, however, is not consistently found in the literature (e.g., Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 1995; Lens et al., 2005). Fifty years ago, Super (1957) postulated that multiple life roles (e.g., work, leisure) can foster adaptability in human development (Hartung, 2002). However, there is scant literature on the effects of the *quality* of work and leisure activities on undergraduates' academic outcomes. The primary purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate the relationship between activity engagement and academic outcomes to a further extent, taking into consideration both the quantity and quality of engagement. Fig. 1 provides an overview of the hypothesized relations.

1.1. Types of activities

Leisure activities and employment are expected to have different relations with academic outcomes. Leisure activities (sports, scouting, etc.) may play a nurturing role for study investment because they help individuals

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