

Employed Students at U-M and Their Subjective Experiences

Over the course of a two-week period, I spent a few hours every day interviewing employed college students at the University of Michigan, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. As a University of Michigan student myself, I wanted to learn more about the atmosphere of student employment at my university and I found there was no better way to do this than to get out and ask my fellow peers. I spent these two weeks going into cafes, dining halls, and other buildings where there were students working to keep university operations running smoothly, and interviewing willing students on their employment experiences. Given a body of research that I familiarized myself with before beginning the interview process, including statistical studies by psychologists and university professional associations about working college students, I wanted to know how employed college students at the University of Michigan relate and contrast to these studies; and how these students feel about their own experiences as employed students.

My fieldwork findings consist of eleven in-depth interviews and additional notes collected over the course of two weeks, as well as one opportunity for participant observation. According to the American Association of University Professors, “‘Ten to fifteen hours per week, on campus’ is the typical response from faculty members and administrators who are asked how much undergraduate students should work at paying jobs while attending college” (Perna 2010). Among the interviews I did at various locations around campus, 5/11 of the interviewees responded that they worked within this recommended time range of 10-15 hours per week. Everyone else worked less than 10 hours per week, with nobody working over the recommended range. Despite the fact that none of the respondents worked over 15 hours per week, 7/11 of interviewees still thought that being employed added additional stress and reduced time that could’ve been spent in professional or extracurricular activities. This was not all

negative, though, as 8/11 and 7/11 respondents said they felt more productive and managed their time better as a result of being employed, respectively. Even though none of the students I interviewed worked over the recommended range, I would imagine there are students who do, and would have a very strong opinion as to the added stress this might have on their academic and social life.

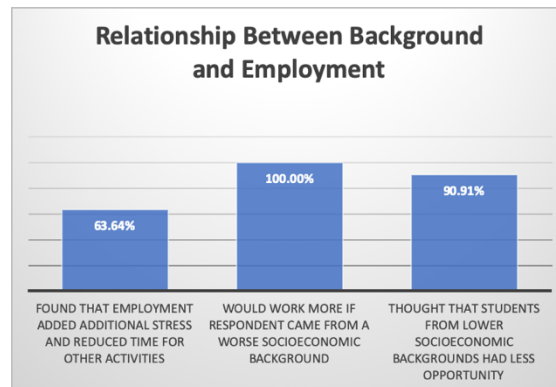
Most of the observations I recorded took place in the East Quad Dining Hall, one of the many dining halls on the Michigan campus. One of my interviewees allowed me into the dish room on a couple of occasions to observe the features and people present. He explained to me that, “things move pretty seamlessly when [the dining hall is] well-staffed and I don’t have to worry about a whole lot. The job isn’t that stressful. The dish-room is pretty relaxed environment.” Aside from the normal features of a dish room, such as sinks and machines meant to wash dishes and utensils, there was music playing at a normal level, as well as a lot of workers. I very quickly noticed that the dish room was diverse. The workers were from different races and varied in age as well as gender. My interviewee told me that, “a lot of times he is working there are adults and other people who are not students, working too.” I found this very intriguing, as I would’ve thought most, if not all, the people working in a college dining hall would be students.

As part of my inquiry, I asked about the resources available to employed students at Michigan and how these students think their experiences would’ve been different had they gone to a different university. Every respondent had a positive thing to say about the resources available for Michigan students seeking employment. 6/11 interviewees were students who were employed as part of the work-study program, which is a program that helps students with financial aid find work on campus. All of them reported that they had little to no trouble finding

work, with one respondent saying he was able to begin working within a week of submitting applications. Evidently, U-M seems to care about working students, and while being employed whilst studying for a degree may be stressful, as the interviews demonstrate, students seemingly also takeaway key skills such as time management and workload balancing.

As for one important characteristic among the students I interviewed, all reported that they were of middle or upper-middle class background. I was concerned with socioeconomic background as not only is it a vital concept in understanding human choices and action, both key ideas from the viewpoint of an anthropologist, interviewees were later asked how they think their employment situation would be different if they came from both a better and worse socioeconomic background. Every respondent, when asked if they would still work even if they came from a better socioeconomic background, claimed they would. I think this result arises from the fact that 10/11 of the interviewees said they either worked for extra income, or because they wanted to be more financially independent from their parents, not necessarily because they needed the money. The one other student said they worked so they could pay off their rent during the summer. When interviewees were asked how they think their employment situation would be different if they came from a worse socioeconomic background, every respondent said they would work more. Accompanying this question was a follow-up question, one I think more narrowly identifies the importance of socioeconomic background: do you think students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have the same opportunity to succeed academically despite their financial hardship? 10/11 of respondents thought that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds did not have the same (had less) opportunity, with most (64%) believing that on top of it being more stressful, students' income would more likely go towards tuition or essentials, rather than spending money.

As an anthropologist, it is hard not to notice some of the inequalities present at the University of Michigan, that can be viewed both quantitatively and qualitatively, as I am attempt to demonstrate in this paper. Though it is not the most blatant form of inequality, simply off the limited data from my interviewees, it could definitely be argued that those students from lower



socioeconomic backgrounds are not going to have the same opportunities as more well-off students, and that is simply looking at it from a working student perspective. As seen in the chart above, every respondent thought they would work more if they came from a worse socioeconomic background; and most (64%) seemed aware of the hardships these students might face if they are forced to work many more hours in order to help pay for tuition or other essentials. Despite the generous amount of financial aid the University of Michigan provides for students every year, 66% of students still come from the top 20% of families (Chetty et al. 2020). These students are already familiar with a certain lifestyle and have a certain educational background as a result of their social class (Stuckey 2020, 2) which will allow them to be able to thrive as students even if they are working ten hours every week. But what about the ~1,610 students who come from the bottom 20% of families, who have not had the same lifestyle and have likely not had the same educational opportunities as wealthier students? While Michigan may do a great service in providing free tuition for students from families with incomes under \$65,000, these students are still more likely to work more just to provide for the essentials that

the university cannot provide for. Just this loss of time alone due to employment might take a toll on these students' academics and extracurricular opportunities.

I think it is important to shed light on both the positives and negatives that employment has on students, in order to help all students be more successful academically and professionally. After all, this should be the primary goal of the university: to build the leaders of tomorrow. Stress and lack of time are factors that the University of Michigan should consider and should not be disproportionately placed on employed students, many of whom already come from more difficult socioeconomic backgrounds. In the limited amount of time I had to do my fieldwork, I was unable to find students from all different backgrounds able to provide me with their subjective experiences. I am not a working student myself, and as such I can only draw upon the information from interviews and observations I undertook, as well as general statistics and data online. I wish I was able to tell the story of all employed students at my university, but it is a difficult task, and I would say that my paper only touches the tip of the iceberg. We should always be working to make sense of the world around us, as anthropologists try to do, and work to make our world better. Evidently from my fieldwork, there are many students who are likely satisfied with their employment and are even learning important skills such as time management, but our work needs to go deeper. We need to find the students who are unhappy and perhaps do not have the same opportunities as other students and work to help them. As anthropologists, knowledge is power, and we need to uncover that knowledge to make our school, our society, and the world a better place for all.

Works Cited

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