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Issue Brief by Frederick M. Hess, Greg Fournier

What Do College Students Do All Day? The Answer Isn't Studying

Introduction

American colleges and universities are being scrutinized as never before. From rising tuition costs and allegations of plagiarism at the highest levels to concerns about low rates of completion and the state of free inquiry on campus, four-year colleges in the U.S. are under the microscope. Yet one crucial issue that is too rarely accorded the attention that it deserves is simply what colleges expect of their students.

Students spend far less time studying than they used to, with full-time students reporting 20–25 combined hours in class and doing schoolwork.[1] American colleges need to reset their expectations for students. Full-time students should expect to devote a full 35-hour week to their

classes and related studies. Boards of governors and campus trustees have a vital role in resetting this expectation and helping colleges put it into practice.

Working Less, Reading Less

On average, today's students work less—both on academic and nonacademic work—than their peers from two or three generations ago. In 2010, economists Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks reported: "In 1961, the average full-time student at a four-year college in the United States studied about twenty-four hours per week, while his modern counterpart puts in only fourteen hours per week." This trend held "for students from all demographic subgroups, for students who worked and those who did not, within every major, and at four-year colleges of every type, degree structure, and level of selectivity."

Babcock and Marks calculated (based on the traditional expectation of two hours of study for each hour of class time) that the typical student should have been spending 30-plus hours each week in class or studying.[2] In short, students were devoting less than half the expected time on actual academic work.[3] This low level

held for a 2016 analysis using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which found that "the average *full-time* college student spent only 2.76 hours per day on all education-related activities . . . for a total of 19.3 hours per week" (emphasis in original).[4] In their 2010 book, *Academically Adrift*, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reported that students spent 12–14 hours per week studying, a decline of roughly 50 percent from a few decades earlier.[5]

Some might assume that today's students are doing less schoolwork because they're spending more time working for pay, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Indeed, National Center for Education Statistics data show that just 40% of full-time undergraduates were employed in 2020, compared with 79% back in the mid-1990s.[6] Despite the declining share of full-time students in the workforce, the 2024 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reported that first-year college students estimated spending just 6.3 hours a week doing assigned reading for their classes and a total of 14.3 hours preparing for class.[7] Professors tend to think that the actual figure is even lower: faculty at public universities estimate that their students spend just 4.9 hours preparing for

their various courses each week.[8]

If students are not devoting as much time as they once did to their studies or work, what are they doing instead? In 2024, the average first-year student in the U.S. reported spending 5.3 hours per week participating in cocurricular activities, 2.4 hours working on campus, 6.9 hours working off campus, and 11.9 hours relaxing and socializing, among other activities.[9] At some elite schools, students (no doubt inspired by the examples of super-successful college dropouts like Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates) spend even less time preparing for class as they work on building their side hustles. Writing in *Harvard Magazine* in April 2024, one student offered a revealing snapshot of daily life on that school's hallowed campus: "This fall, one of my friends did not attend a single lecture or class section until more than a month into the semester. Another spent 40 to 80 hours a week on her preprofessional club, leaving barely any time for school. A third launched a startup while enrolled, leaving studying by the wayside."[10]

None of this bodes well for student learning. Unsurprisingly, researchers have found a significant relationship between

time spent studying and student outcomes, with study time "at least as important [for student success] as college entrance exam scores" (which have historically been perhaps the most accurate predictor of student outcomes).[11] The result is that students are not getting the opportunity to master the work habits, knowledge, or skills that a college education is supposed to provide.

Indeed, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported that professors find that their students "struggle to come to class [and] to keep up with the work," and "they expect professors to work with them, and they assume they'll pass their classes anyhow."[12] When the *Chronicle* asked faculty members about student disengagement, faculty reported that "far fewer students show up to class," "those who do avoid speaking when possible," "many skip the readings or the homework," and "they have trouble remembering what they learned."[13] The *Chronicle* has reported that large numbers of students "don't see the point in doing much work outside of class" and that, to many students, "a 750-word essay feels long."[14]

Students are uncomfortable with once-unremarkable academic expectations. A

2024 *Atlantic* account reported that today's faculty are charged with students who aren't used to reading books, "struggle to attend to small details while keeping track of the overall plot," and tell professors that "the reading load feels impossible."[15] Adam Kotsko, who teaches at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, lamented the decline in his students' willingness to read. "For most of my career," wrote Kotsko, "I assigned around 30 pages of reading per class meeting as a baseline expectation. Now students are intimidated by anything over 10 pages." He insisted that he had "literally never met a professor who did not share [his] experience."[16] Even for students who do their assignments, the *Chronicle* reported that "their limited experience with reading also means they don't have the context to understand certain arguments or points of view."[17]

The erosion of academic culture has had a corrosive effect on students' work habits and their sense of what learning entails. Harvard scholars Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner tell of students stressed by "tests, readings, and stuff" who lament that "if you're studying very late at night, it's even harder to fall asleep."[18] Students at elite universities occasionally take to the

pages of college newspapers to lament "the absurd expectation of constant productivity" and to make the case for replacing letter grades with pass-fail options.[19] This mind-set helps explain why 64% of four-year college students say that they put "a lot" of effort into schoolwork, yet only 6% report spending more than 20 hours per week studying and doing homework.[20]

Inflated Grades, Deflated Expectations

College culture has been changed by the temptation for professors to make their peace with lowered expectations. During the pandemic,"the nature of academic deadlines changed," observed Simmons University psychology professor Sarah Rose Cavanagh; as a result, she suggested, pandemic-era accommodations conditioned students to have an "expectation of endless flexibility."[21] A professor at the Stevens Institute of Technology told the *Chronicle* that she had resorted to assigning fewer readings and hoping that students would concentrate on those that were "interesting to them." This proved inadequate, as students still deemed

her demands, such as including at least 25 sources in a final research paper, "unreasonable."[22]

Across much of higher education, the *Atlantic* has reported, faculty say that they feel as though they have no choice but to "assign less reading and lower their expectations."[23] Students' own accounts tell a similar tale. In 2024, 74% of first-year students reported being given no assignments of more than 11 pages, while 39% said that they were asked to write nothing longer than five pages. And it is not just first-year students: 51% of seniors in 2024 said that they had completed zero assignments of more than 11 pages during their final year.[24]

Yet even as the effort asked of students has gone down, grades have only gone up. At institutions like Harvard and Yale, the mean GPA is 3.7 or higher, and 80% of grades are at least an A-minus.[25] But grade inflation is not just an elite-school problem. Indeed, two decades ago, John Merrow of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching stated: "Students everywhere report that they average only 10–15 hours of academic work outside of class per week and are able to attain 'B' or better grade-point averages."[26] Today, the

evidence suggests that grade inflation has proceeded in public and private colleges at approximately the same rate.[27]

Grade inflation, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Harvey Mansfield, the distinguished Harvard political theorist, has been sounding the alarm for decades. Famously (or notoriously), in 2001, Mansfield announced that he would henceforth give students two grades: a private grade reflecting the score they deserved, and an official grade "based on Harvard's system of inflated grades."[28] Mansfield traces the beginning of grade inflation to the late 1960s, partly in response to students' concerns that poor grades could cost them deferments from the Vietnam War. What started in discrete episodes, however, has metastasized into a chronic condition.[29]

Few observers dispute that grade inflation has skyrocketed over the past few decades, but no one in a position of authority has done much about it. At Princeton, a much-discussed push to curb grade inflation in the early 2000s enjoyed fleeting success but ultimately failed. Despite finding "no evidence that [the grade-inflation-reducing policy] had any measurable negative impact on Princeton students'

competitiveness for graduate school, professional schools, postgraduate fellowships or employment," the committee tasked with investigating the policy recommended doing away with it to avoid "making [students] feel as though they are competing for a limited resource of A grades."[30]

The problem with a culture of excuse-making is that it tends to feed on itself. At the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley, where just one-fourth of new students were proficient in reading and math, a senior vice provost blamed academic challenges on the fact that students lived "hectic lives" in which "school may not be their first priority."[31] A professor of women's studies at the University of Wisconsin maintained her "no-questions-asked" deadline-extension policy after the pandemic because her students were "fatigued over the state of the world."[32] A San Diego State University professor reported that she incorporates three "mental health days" into the syllabus, canceling those classes and urging students to instead "focus on their health and well-being."[33] The 2024 anti-Israel protests were treated by some institutions as another cause to relax standards. Citing concerns about student mental health,

Columbia Law School gave students a pass-fail option on their final exams, while Rutgers University paused its finals.[34]

Some blame for declining expectations may be attributed to student evaluations—end-of-semester anonymous surveys that students fill out to rate their professors on a variety of dimensions, the results of which often factor into decisions about promotion and tenure. As economist Richard Vedder observed, faculty are all too aware that"students prefer a light amount of reading and writing papers and a light, as opposed to a heavy, study load."[35] An examination of Rate My Professors, a website on which students anonymously review faculty, found an inverse relationship between professorial "difficulty" and "quality," leading the authors to conclude: "When you see a poorly rated professor, odds are you are simply looking at a professor . . . or a subject that is challenging."[36]

Colleges Need a Cultural Reset

Too many colleges have seemingly lost sight of what it means to be an educational institution. Campus leaders need to remind students, professors, and administrators

that the purpose of higher education is an intellectual one and that this requires hard work. Colleges need to set the bar high for students and faculty alike. But this is not something that we can trust professors or even deans of faculty to do on their own, given the social and professional costs incurred by individual faculty who assign more work than their colleagues. This is where boards come in. They must make clear to campus leadership that it is time to get back to work.

Is this kind of board leadership a threat to free inquiry or academic freedom? *Absolutely not.* Let us repeat ourselves here, just to be safe: There is *nothing* about raising expectations or reaffirming colleges' instructional mission that conflicts with core academic values of inquiry, exploration, or collegiality.

Keep in mind that colleges and universities are educational institutions with a formative mission. Faculty are hired with the expectation that they will prepare, inform, and educate students. That is part of the job. In the course of that work, faculty are expected to show up for class and treat students with respect, which includes setting appropriate expectations. Those expectations are, for good reason,

not deemed a threat to academic freedom. Raising the bar for rigor in no way intrudes on faculty autonomy regarding content, viewpoint, or pedagogy. Rather, it is an attempt to ensure that students are being challenged to do the work deemed appropriate by the collective academic enterprise.

So what needs to be done?

Raise the Bar

College faculty must raise their expectations for student work: reading, writing, problem sets, and related out-of-class assignments. Indeed, colleges that accept federal funds are already expected to abide by the federal definition of a credit-hour, which "reasonably approximates not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week."[37] Merely to comply with federal law, therefore, a typical three-credit course should entail a *minimum* of nine hours of student work each week. Assuming a 12-credit course load, students should be required to spend at least 36 hours attending class or doing homework each week. Indeed, at colleges that accept federal

grants or aid, this expectation should be regarded as a legal obligation.

To meet this obligation, each class should incorporate approximately six hours of out-of-class work per week. A typical class in the humanities or social sciences could reasonably require students to complete a two-page essay and 75–80 pages of reading *each week.* For students taking four courses, eight pages of writing, along with 300 pages of reading, per week is wholly reasonable. We fully appreciate that these figures may appear shockingly high to those who have grown accustomed to the status quo, but that misconception says more about the degradation of expectations than about their feasibility.

Boards of trustees, not professors, should set these policies because faculty are caught in a collective-action problem. Professors who assign more work than others are viewed harshly by students, many of whom (understandably) would rather take easier courses with less work than harder courses with more work. In his 2018 book, *The Case Against Education*, George Mason University economist Bryan Caplan observes how this works, noting that students who "struggle to win admission" to good colleges end up "hunt[ing] for professors with low

expectations." As a result, "a professor who wants to fill a lecture hall hands out lots of As and little homework."[38] If all professors were required to assign large workloads, this problem would be greatly reduced.

Restore Rigor to Grading

Grade inflation suffers from a similar collective-action problem. If Princeton's abortive "grade deflation" experiment is any guide, combating grade inflation will take collaborative effort and a sustained commitment on the part of institutional leadership.[39] After all, grading does not happen in isolation. Left to their own devices, faculty will be overwhelmed by student demands. A professor who seeks to uphold standards in isolation is following a recipe for headaches and fears of empty lecture halls. Indeed, the "hassle factor" of fending off student complaints, overbearing parents, and split-the-difference administrators makes it much easier for faculty just to go easy when handing out grades. That is why clear, uniform expectations must be set and overseen by those with some remove from classroom pressures. Only in this way can

faculty require rigor without being singled out for grief.

What kinds of changes are in order? This determination should be made by boards and campus leaders, with substantial input from faculty. But several sensible principles should be applied. First, they should establish explicit expectations regarding grading policy and grade composition. Second, they should explore the merits of adopting common essay prompts, exam questions, or grading protocols across similar courses in order to foster more consistent grading. Third, they should consider adopting anonymous grading, consistent grading rubrics, or standardized policies on absences and late work. Colleges should allow minimal exceptions to these rules.

Of course, part of the solution to lowered workload expectation has to rest in the K–12 education system. Students are not working hard in college partly because they are not being challenged in middle and high school. Moreover, because grade inflation is rampant in K–12 as well as higher education, students have been conditioned to expect good grades for minimal work.[40] Rather than waiting for the K–12 system to get its house in order,

colleges should raise the bar themselves. Doing so might even kick off a cycle that yields healthy changes in the nation's high schools.

Embrace Transparency and Accountability

It is one thing for boards to set high expectations—but another thing entirely to enforce them. Without any visibility into how much time students spend working for class, how much reading is expected, or even how many courses they take, newly raised expectations would be more bluster than actual policy. Luckily, tools are available to boards for collecting such information.

Boards should instruct college leaders to conduct regular syllabus reviews, surveys of student time usage, and audits of reading and coursework, and to share those data with the board annually. If the results are not consistent with the board's expectations, trustees should direct campus leaders to respond appropriately. This kind of scrutiny should be done with complete respect for content, pedagogy, and free inquiry; the point is to ensure that students are being educated, not to manage the

substance of that education.

Campuses should take advantage of external resources that can illuminate what is happening on campus and determine how it compares with peer institutions. At least three existing surveys can usefully inform this work: NSSE and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), both conducted by Indiana University's School of Education, and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program surveys administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). NSSE provides a snapshot of how undergraduates spend their time and what they think they're gaining from attending college; FSSE includes questions that explore perceptions regarding how much time students spend on academic work.[41] HERI's College Senior Survey collects responses that can provide a more summative picture of what students say that they have done and learned during college.[42] More widespread participation in these surveys and dissemination of the results will foster a far more comprehensive picture of what is transpiring on campus.

Boards should require that their institution collect this kind of data regularly, by utilizing existing instruments, collaborating

to launch new ones, or administering their own surveys. They should further seek ways to share data with peer institutions, use these data to assess performance and set their institutional vision, and share top-level data points with the campus community and on the institution's website.[43]

Make Faculty Part of the Solution

Perhaps most important, boards should ensure that faculty are enlisted and empowered in the work of raising the academic bar. While many faculty are understandably loath to come across as mean-spirited drill sergeants or to take on the additional burdens required to maintain high expectations, there is also broad agreement among faculty that students are not working very hard. While some professors may feel obliged to lament these demands for elevated expectations, we suspect that a quiet majority will relish their newfound license to raise the bar.

Challenging students or setting high expectations can be a thankless task for faculty today. But it is not nearly enough to simply ensure that faculty no longer feel penalized for acting like responsible

educators; they must be encouraged, supported, and valued for doing so. That means that teaching loads, the amount of work assigned, and course expectations should be recognized and given due weight when it comes to faculty evaluation, promotion, and compensation. Since this means that professors will be expected to devote more time to teaching, grading, mentoring, and sitting for office hours, campus leaders should appropriately moderate expectations for faculty research and service. These changes are best approached in a manner that is inclusive, not punitive. As part of this shift, administrators and senior faculty should deemphasize student evaluations. Such feedback can solicit constructive criticism but should be used with extraordinary care when evaluating instructors.

Elevating workload expectations will have broad implications for institutional governance. Since universities are often more concerned with bringing in revenue via grants to well-known researchers than they are with teaching, most faculty search committees place enormous emphasis on publication volume and prestige. As faculty search committees review job and tenure applications, boards should pay attention to the energy, commitment, and rigor that

scholars bring to teaching. This should be reflected in compensation guidelines, the awarding of bonuses, and considerations such as sabbaticals or institutional support.

Conclusion

Even sharp-tongued critics of higher education have too rarely addressed the issue of what students do all day or how colleges might revive a culture of academic rigor. Those sounding alarms about higher education have raised important questions about cost, outcomes, ideological bias, and free inquiry, but they have too rarely focused on simple questions about student work and collegiate expectations. Reform-minded leaders have championed new institutes to bring intellectual balance to campus and new policies intended to boost completion rates, but few of these efforts involve much explicit attention to student work. This is not an either/or, of course. These efforts are good and useful in their own right. But they have not had much to say about the work that students actually do. It is time for that to change.

Endnotes

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