

Perspectives on Balancing Academics and Social Activity

In order to optimize functioning, it is necessary to find a balance between the various roles one plays. A student often wears many different hats: partner, worker, friend, classmate, etc. Often times these roles are in conflict, and a student must be adept at attending to a variety of factors and assessing priorities.

Johns Hopkins Student Assistance Program

Hilary Phan, a student working at our Center, was interested in the tensions students experience in balancing academic pursuits and social life. So she undertook a project to review the literature and also asked a sample of university students to reflect on their high school experiences.

Below is her personal perspective followed by a couple of brief notes from the literature and a sample of student responses to her interview questions.

One Student's Personal Perspective

For the majority of my high school and college experience, I could never find that perfect balance between social and academic activities. I always had trouble deciding whether to prioritize one or the other, and often felt guilty when I chose one activity over the other.

During high school, I did not have much of a social life. Academics was always my priority and I felt like I did not have enough time to socialize, as I was primarily concerned with getting good grades for college applications.

However, that changed in freshman year of college. During my first year, I socialized so much that it had a negative effect on my education. I went out a lot, often neglecting homework or quizzes that I had to do. As a result, my grades dropped drastically.

I decided to make a huge change in my second year and go back to studying all the time, and this resulted in significantly better grades. However, it had a huge toll on my mental health, and I was not receiving the support that I needed from my friends, often rejecting them in favor of studying more. I did better in school, but I was also significantly more stressed than I ever was before.

Now that I am in my third year of college, I am still struggling to find that perfect balance, but I believe that my social and academic lives are more balanced than they were previously. I still study a lot, but I find time to study with friends, which helps me because they act as a form of emotional support as well as a form of academic support, because I can ask them questions. And I occasionally go out with my friends, but only as a study break or when there aren't any assignments immediately due. It helps me relax and forget about the academic stress that I experience for a short while.

I believe that having both a social and an academic life has benefitted me greatly; I am getting better grades, but I am also less stressed than I was before. I am interested in learning how other students find this balance, and I'm curious to learn about their experiences with balancing social and academic activities.

From the Literature

Social activities and academic commitments are discussed as often interfering with each other, and students then are forced to choose between the two. Trying to balance the two adds stress due to conflicting expectations and demands. Oftentimes, a student's prioritize one over the other, with a negative impact on general well-being (see reference list).

*The material in this document reflects work done by Hilary Phan as part of her involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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How big a problem is it, and what proportion of students are impacted? Studies are somewhat limited, but available evidence suggests that a significant imbalance has negative consequences for many students.

What are current practices and policies related to this concern and how effective are they?

Recognizing that academic and social life can interfere with each other, universities and others concerned about the matter increasingly offer strategies to address the problem. For example, see

- > *School-Life Balance* – http://jhsap.org/self_help_resources/school-life_balance/
- > *Balancing Academics and Extracurriculars* – <https://undergrad.wharton.upenn.edu/student-voices/balancing-academics-extracurriculars/>
- > *5 Tips to Achieve Your Optimal Work/School/Life Balance* – <http://sps.columbia.edu/news/5-tips-achieve-your-optimal-workschoollife-balance>
- > *Balancing for Life* – https://healthservices.camden.rutgers.edu/topics_balance
- > *Balancing College School Work and Social Life* – <http://www.collegeconfidential.com/dean/000241/>
- > *How to achieve life balance as a college freshman* – <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/08/19/how-to-achieve-life-balance-as-a-college-freshman/>

All these sources recognize that good interpersonal relationships with peers and staff provide valuable social and academic supports. Such supports help students adjust to new challenges and cope with ongoing demanding situations. Students are seen as benefitting from group work, shared workloads, and collaborative learning. Peers are seen as giving each other emotional support. Social activities are seen as a time to relax and lessen the stress of academics.

It is noteworthy that many students who drop out of college report a lack of social support as a contributing factor.

A Sample of Student Responses to Interview Questions

Q. *Remembering back to high school, did your social life ever interfere with academics?*

“I made a lot more friends in high school than in any other part of my K-12 years so I definitely felt like I didn't navigate the social life versus academic life very well. I was also more impulsive back then ... was influenced by my peers more easily and because I wanted to prove independence from my parents. However, to say that my social life was an interference, wouldn't be most accurate because I still valued my learning. I just didn't effectively manage my time.”

“When I was in high school, I chose both academics and social life. I participated in a few student groups and was active at school. I also studied a lot when I was home. So I didn't have enough sleep all the time. I would say I did well in the school activities, but it had really hurt my academics performance and health. I couldn't focus in my morning classes and I had trouble absorbing class materials.”

“For the majority of my high school and college experience, I could never find that perfect balance between social and academic activities. I always had trouble deciding whether to prioritize one or the other, and often felt guilty when I chose one activity over the other. During high school, I did not have much of a social life. Academics was always my priority and I felt like I did not have enough time to socialize, as I was primarily concerned with getting good grades for college applications.”

“From an outsider's perspective, it would seem that during high school I did not have much of a social life because I was in an intensive International Baccalaureate program for all 4 years and seemed to always be focused on school. I, on the other hand, thought I had a social life. My friends and I would bond over

our academic assignments - we would do homework together and hang out after. In high school, I felt like my social life was infused with my academics.”

Q. *In high school, did your academic life ever interfere with your social life?*

“I didn't have much of a plan back then, and I had a hard time making sense of how my education would translate to anything in the future. But I grew up in a city where most people pursued higher education so I just trusted in that process. I have definitely used the phrase ‘I have a lot of homework’ as a way to get out of social events. But again, this didn't jeopardize any friendships I had....”

“My junior year of high school was the year I jokingly say that I became a hermit. I did little to no socializing unless it was studying with other students. So yes, I would say that because I went to an extremely competitive high school where one's GPA was the most valued indicator of one's status, my academic life definitely stunted my social life in high school. That being said, I did still make friends through classes and club activities so it's not as though I did zero socializing at all. It was just the case that in high school, academics would always trump socialization if it came to it.”

“It sounds odd, but I feel that my academic life in high school actually led to me having a social life. When we were given what seemed like impossible assignments, I grew closer to my classmates because we went through those times together. Our tough academic assignments led us to socially support each other through the rest of high school. I joined extracurricular programs in high school because I had genuine interests in them and because I had friends who were in them too - I never really thought about how they would look on a college application. I participated in these activities because it promoted my social life and let me hang out with my friends, and it can be argued that in this case, since extracurricular programs would eventually help me get into college, my desire to hang out with friends and have a social life actually allowed me to get into a great academic school.”

Q. *Did having a social life benefit academics (e.g., studying with friends, group projects, etc.)?*

“Yes, but it depends on who you're studying with. If the people around you actually participate and value the time spent for group studying, it beats having to learn independently. Some friends keep me accountable and focused when I felt distracted and vice versa. There are definitely skills you learn when you work with other people, so having that social experience/background helps with understanding different views to a problem and collaborative work.”

“I think having a social life benefit my academics. Studying with friends is more motivating, and I tend to focus more/stay in the library for longer period of time when studying with friends.”

“Studying with friends, depending on the class, can help me A LOT because I tend to study by talking out loud. Friends can also help me edit papers. Friends will give advice on classes they've taken; friends will recommend classes and professors to take. I can also share material I've learned in class and gain new perspectives on it. Something we learn in class, like say a movie or a museum, I can go to or watch with friends, and enrich my learning even further. An indirect method friends help is if I'm too anxious or stressed out academically, I can depend on people for comfort and support. Feeling more relaxed, I then feel I can handle my sometimes tumultuous academic schedules (several midterms in one week). I would say in general, time management is key. It's never I should solely concentrate on my grades or friends. It's always a balance, and unfortunately on the quarter system, the minute you figure out a balance, well, it's time for a new quarter. But

time management is a wonderful skill to have, and I am grateful that I'm learning to sharpen this skill.”

“Having a social life does benefit my academics tremendously. Having a support system of friends really relieves me of stress and helps me go forth with studying confidently. I personally work better when I am happy and motivated rather than stressed out and afraid of my tests. I study with my friends in silence, but if my friends become a huge distraction, then I usually have the willpower to leave and study somewhere else. I feel that having a good social life and a good academic life requires balance and knowing what is important. I know that I need to do well in my classes so I can get a better gpa and get into grad school, but I also know that when I've had a rough day, I'm going to want to be around my friends who will support me and help bring me back up. If I can see that my mental health is not doing well, hanging out with my friends helps my mental health which ultimately helps me do better in my academics.”

“I was able to meet a lot of students who inspire me to study hard and play hard. I enjoyed most of the group projects I was assigned and learned a lot about teamwork and leadership through collaborating with others. I was fortunate to meet many high-achieving individuals with similar goals. We were able to bounce research ideas off of each other and share information about classes. My social life outside of academia also serves as a buffer during difficult times. Spending time with friends helped me through many stressful times at school. Social life is a pretty broad concept. There were social activities that aided my learning, but also those that hindered my academics. I enjoy that you are exploring the different ways our social lives and academic lives interact.”

“To some extent having a social life benefited my academics in the sense that it helped me get away from academics for a while and relieve my stress. As a result, I would be more focused when I went back to working on my academics. Socializing in terms of studying with friends and working in groups never really worked in my case because more often than not, working in groups led to some students not putting in as much work as others and studying with friends led to more talking than studying. Sometimes there is a balance between your social and academic life and it would be interesting to see what happens when other parts of your life are affected by academics, such as your mental and physical health.”

“It was actually nice to meet with friends when I was struggling at school. Even just chatting for a while helped. It is because they understood why I struggled and how I felt about it, as they had similar experience too. It made me feel being supported and I was not alone. Sometimes when I was in the same class with my friends, we could help each other study by asking questions about class materials.”

Student responses clearly indicate the problem of balancing academics and social life and the value of social and academic supports.

The Problem Continues in the Workplace

Since the balance of work and social life continues throughout one's career, we were interested in how school professionals experience the matter. Here's a few typical responses:

Q. How does your work affect your social interactions with colleagues?

“Because many of my colleagues share the same passion I do for this work, I find that my interactions with them are around the work, our shared interest, and mutual encouragement. With colleagues who don't share the same vision for this work, I find that I maintain a superficial collegial rapport but am not as deeply invested in the relationship.”

“Since I lived in a different town than where I worked, I didn’t have a lot of opportunities to socialize with colleagues, other than an occasional lunch. Everyone was so busy! One of the best things I ever did was to organize a car pool. That allowed us 35 minutes a day (each way) to process whatever happened at work, problem solve, listen to and network with one another. We also used this time to keep up on each others’ personal lives. Since colleagues in my carpool worked in different areas (ex. special education, family services, early childhood, etc.), sharing our work experiences helped develop a better understanding of each other’s work. This understanding also spread to our individual social networks so that other colleagues understood workplace issues from others’ perspectives. Work can taxing — but should never override the personal connections that are made with colleagues.”

“Much of the time spent speaking with colleagues is centered on points of case management, resources used, forms/processes shared, debate on legal requirements as relative to specific situation, supporting one another with time and compassion. My social interactions with colleagues is related to work. I’ve worked with people for decades and know very little about them. So, to delineate: Focus on work in our relationships promotes a uni-dimensional perspective where relationships are developed out of work related needs. Example, I interact more with other elementary psychs more than the secondary psychs although some of the elementary psychs are geographically much further from my assigned schools. I use their counsel and experience to move forward without needing to invent the whole wheel by myself.”

Q. How do your social relationships with colleagues impact the work that gets done?

“I believe it keeps us motivated and inspired to keep on keeping on. They serve as a positive sounding board and a safe place to commiserate but then problem solve. They share the load.”

“My relationships with my colleagues impacts the work that gets done because I bounce ideas and ask questions of others and they do the same within our group. Psychologists are geographically isolated as each has 1 or 2 schools and we do not cross paths as other staff members assigned to the same site might do. We see each other for one hour once per month for a staff meeting the purpose of which is for admin to tell us what to do.”

“When I worked in education, I made a concerted effort to connect with as many colleagues as possible over the course of a week, both inside and outside of the education system. Many of these connections were simple ‘hellos’ on the way to and from the coffee room or to check in on someone as I headed to a meeting. I strived to make these face-to-face interactions rather than electronic whenever possible. These efforts are important since some people are more likely to be open and willing to listen to your concerns if they have a personal connection. These connections increase work efficiencies and effectiveness since colleagues can be approached more directly with questions and problems when a relationship exists. One huge example was the day I used professional networks to get administrative signatures for a grant. I needed administrative signatures from two different agencies that happened to be in the same meeting that day. I was able to briefly talk to one administrator who came out of the meeting because she knew me. Instead of getting her signature, she invited me into the meeting and generally explained the grant with the looming deadline. One of the administrators suggested that everyone sign it — and they did. They knew about the work we were trying to do, trusted us and trusted the administrator who invited me in. As luck (and professional networks) would have it, I got 10 agencies to sign on in a matter of minutes. I firmly believe such a thing could never happen without social relationships and trust.”

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