A DELICATE BALANCE: WHAT STUDENTS SAY ABOUT BALANCING WORK, FAMILY, AND COLLEGE

Mary Ziskin
Jacquelyn Player-Sanders

MWSC

Working Students, Succeeding Students

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Describing College-going:
A “new majority” experience

- Mobile working students (Ewell, Schild, & Paulson, 2003)
- The “dynamic mix of time and space that marked student pathways in the 1990s” (Adelman, 2006)
- The complex and increasingly prevalent experience of employment
Literature and Theory: Progress, Critiques, Disjunctures

- Typical focus on linear enrollment patterns and traditional student experiences
  - Tinto, 1993
  - Studies that extend and critique these models
  - Bean & Metzner, 1985

- Current theory about college going and student success does not describe the processes of mobile working students well
  - Explains comparatively less about students at commuter institutions.
  - Illustrates the complexity of the role of employment
  - Reflects time lines more typical of traditional student employment
  - Has not generally incorporated qualitative inquiry or students’ own descriptions
Research on Working Students

- Complex effects of work on student success
  - Perna, Cooper & Li, 2006
  - Bradley, 2006

- Points us to further research not only to understand more, but to understand implications more
  - McDonough & Calderone, 2006
Research Questions

- What are the characteristics, perceptions, and college experiences of mobile working students in northwest Indiana?

- How do the sometimes competing demands of college, work and family life play into their academic success?
Approach to the Study

Focus Today: Focus Groups with 116 Student Participants

- Two universities and a multi-campus community college in one metropolitan area
- Applied ethnographic approach (Chambers, 2000)
- Focus groups and interviews
  - 251 Students
  - 71 Faculty & Practitioners
- Combined with analyses from a SLED, to place qualitative findings in context by both region and state.
Semi-structured interview protocols

Focused on students’ sense-making
- Educational and career goals
- Campus experiences
- Experiences on the job
- Family responsibilities
- Strategies for academic success

251 participants recruited via required general education courses and campus contexts
Parents and non-parents
Aged 18 to over 55
Dependent-status and independent-status
Number of hours worked per week ranged, and focus groups included students looking for work as well.
Theme One: The Balance

- Working students, independent students’ experiences and obligations vary a great deal.
- Participants described how they divide weeks and days to meet obligations associated with their multiple roles
Differentiating the working student experience

P2: I schedule work around my classes. Work is just not even that important. It’s not my career. So I really don’t care about it.

P3: ... Working [until late], and closing – like I like to go [out] after work too sometimes, or study – I have to give myself at least a later class. So ten’s about a good time, because then you, there’s a lot more classes around ten and one, so that’s how I pick my classes. And then...I did one day longer and one day earlier, so on those days that I get out earlier of school I can get more hours in at work. So I did schedule at the beginning and after work pretty much.

P1: I just like going two days a week.... [It allows] just more time to study too. I have Wednesday and Monday to finish what I need. So I can do a class for each day if I wanted to.

P5: I usually do the opposite of that. I usually go to school Monday through the Thursday, because I know if I have those two extra days off I’ll end up working those two days and then I won't have any— I’ll lose time that I’d be either studying or doing homework, or something like that.

P4: I just go around the time I think somebody can watch the baby.
I only work on the weekends. So I do twelve hour shifts...Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. ... I go to work 6 o’clock in the morning. I don’t get home until 6 p.m. So if there was homework that I needed to get done-- a lot of teachers give you homework Thursday or Wednesday, ...— I didn’t have the time to do it. ... I was always stressed doing homework, and there was never [any] family time. It was either homework, or work, or that was basically it.

---White student in her 40’s, with teenagers and young children
It’s not really that hard to balance it... like the week would be, I’d be up from 7:00 to 10:00 every day doing homework and school and work. ...I’ll do all my [assignments] during the week and on the weekend I’ll just work and have some time off. So I just have five long days and two days where I can just work and relax. It’s not that hard to juggle.

—White dependent-status student in his early 20s
Dividing Days...

Mondays and Wednesdays I have one class and I’m done by 11:15, but then I go straight to work and then I work until 7:00 or 8:00. Then the good thing about my daycare is that she stays open to 11:30. ....So if I need to stay late she’ll keep her for me... Then Tuesdays and Thursdays ...I’m in school from 8:30 to 5:00... Tuesdays and Thursdays I don’t work but every other day I do work. And then Saturday and Sunday [my daughter]’s with my mom... She’s off on the weekends so she keeps my daughter.

---African American student in her 30’s
Theme Two: Experiences on Campus

- Students described what goes into their feeling like they belong on campus.

- Students emphasized that one-on-one connection is important to their success.
I am past my plan for where I was supposed to be at this age of my life, **but being here has made me feel like it’s okay.** It’s “You’re supposed to be here. You’re supposed to finish and graduate...”

-- *returning African American student in her mid-20s*
You get that one-on-one...

The reading lab, last semester, I had to go to all the time. And the girls knew me by face, “Oh, just sign in, [Tina]”...It’s kind of nice to know that they remember who you are. It’s more person-to-person...here. Your class settings aren’t as big. You get that one-on-one, or the attention that you kind of need. I couldn’t imagine myself in a classroom with 700 people or 1,000 people, kind of just like a number I guess. To me, here, it’s just more personal.

---returning White student in her 40’s
Students talked with us about how they make sense of obligations that sometimes seem to ‘compete’ with each other.
...I’m not going to do that.

But I’m like them. I work part time and I have three kids at home and I’m trying to pay rent. I’m the only person working in my household. So between trying to juggle rent, car note, [electricity], cable and whatever else I may want to do, I have to do it out of my income. And [to pay a fee for an entrance exam] that I know that I’m not going to pass ...is stupid. I’m not going to do that.

--African American student in her late 30s
...I can’t just work weekends...

...It’s hard because I can’t just work weekends. It’s just really stressful because it’s like I barely see my daughter as is and then ...It’s like, “Okay I have to quit the job that I have, or just work Saturday and Sunday, and then do the clinical.” But then I’m not getting paid...I mean in the long run it’s good, but then it’s a sacrifice in between.

--African American nursing student in her 30s
Summary

- Time Structuring
  - Differentiated experiences
  - Key dimensions
    - Reliable income for basic needs and college-going
    - Reliable childcare, and other support for family obligations

- Experiences on campus
  - Positive experiences and descriptions emphasize one-on-one interaction and personal connection
  - Salience of education’s “sorting functions” in students’ descriptions
Group Discussion

- How do students’ access to childcare -- or lack of access to childcare -- influence our work and interactions with students?

- How do differences in students’ financial situations influence our work and interactions with students?
Discussion (continued)

- How can institutions, faculty and practitioners help students find the one-on-one connections on campus they describe as important to success?
Contact Us

Indiana University
Project on Academic Success

http://pas.indiana.edu
mziskin@indiana.edu