

## Does Academic Performance Decline When Nursing Students Work 12 or More Hours per Week?

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### ABSTRACT

*It has been a common practice, internationally that college and university- based nursing programs encourage undergraduate nursing students not to obtain either part time or full time employment during a nursing program semester due to the high intensity and demands of these programs. Limited literature is available on this topic, a few studies suggested that it does have detrimental impact in the performance of nursing students and other studies showed only a minimal effect. The purpose of the study was to identify if a nursing student working part time or more influences their overall GPA in a nursing program and determine the amount of stress they experience. Results showed that 65% of students do work, with 40% working in healthcare settings. While a student's academic performance may not be impacted by their working, 47% of these students report feeling overwhelmed with the challenge of balancing their academic performance with their work responsibilities. Faculty need to be challenged and to be innovative in thinking of ways to allow the student to be successful in school and still be able to maintain a job.*

### Keywords

Nursing students, GPA, Employment, Nursing school, Part time work, Academic performance.

### Introduction

In recent years due to many factors such as nursing shortages, employment down-sizing, recessions, the influx of individuals embracing nursing as their second career, the higher costs of living, and the increase of nursing salaries there has been a rise in the number of students enrolled in college and university nursing programs. Nursing employment opportunities have expanded due to the increasing health care needs of the large population of "baby boomers", changes in health insurances, and the increase in health disparities across the nation.

The current nursing student is from various generations and because of this many have family responsibilities. These undergraduate nursing students, in order to meet their financial

obligations of paying for their education as well as providing for their families, often seek employment in addition to their student role. This employment may limit the amount of time the student is able to spend on their nursing studies and thus have a negative impact on their overall academic performance.

### Review of Literature

Studies looking at the impact of college students working on academic performance are very limited. Those that are found are not that recent. Even more limiting are those that focus on nursing students who work and their academic performance.

Financial need, the ability to pay their educational costs, is the single most driving factor that compels a student to seek employment [1-9]. An Australian University reported the number of students working between 11 and 20 hours per week had increased from 32% to 42%, between 1994 and 1999, and those that did work had lower grades than those students who did not

work [10]. Australian research also reported that in 2000, 16% of students identified that paid work had a negative impact on their academic performance and by 2006; this figure had risen to 40% [11]. “More than half of students reported that work meant less time for study and work fatigue was a factor that also impacted negatively on study” [11]. Students often report that they have to continuously “juggle their time” between work and study. While some balance this well, others struggle. They feel that they have to compromise the long term benefit of study against the financial reward offered by work which allows them to pay for their tuition, often resulting in a lower academic performance [12].

While the number of studies examining nursing students who work and the effect on academic achievement is limited, many of these studies have been done in the United Kingdom and Australia, with a limited number done in the United States. Nicholl and Timmins [13] reported that the overall stressor for Irish nursing students who worked was trying to maintain the balance of work commitment and required study, this finding was also reported by Norman, et al. [4]. In their study, Salamonson and Andrews [14] found that 78% of nursing students were engaged in part-time employment, trying to balance both academic with working demands. A study in the United Kingdom [2] found that 47% of students worked an average of 13 hours or more in outside employment during their course work. When students were asked to evaluate the impact of employment, they were most likely to identify “no effect”. However, a number of studies which examined nursing students and working found that it was not that working in itself that was detrimental to academic achievement, but it was working greater than 16 hours/week that has been identified as a predictor of poorer academic outcomes [6-8,14]. Salamonson, et al. [12] consider this 16 hour/week threshold as the “tipping point” of having a negative effect on academic performance. Working more than 16 hours per week often lead to less time in studying, missing lectures, and submitting assignments late [14]. Schoofs, Bosold, Slot, Flentje [15] found the negative effect of working was decreased studying time, with one student stating in, “I’m sure if I was not working, I could probably achieve a little bit better grades”.

An extensive study done by the U.S. Department of Education [5] found that 70-80% of students worked while they were enrolled in college, with about one quarter of students working full time. Working more than part time does seem to have a negative impact on grades. This study showed that as the number of hours spent working increases, the average GPA for students who work showed a modest decline. In addition it was found that working more than 15 to 20 hours per week has a negative impact on persistence (remaining in school) and degree completion. In addition, it was found that “the more hours students work, the greater the decline in their GPA” [14]. In a multicenter Italian study, Dante et al. [7], reported that nursing students who worked more than 16 hours/week while they were studying had a higher probability of not graduating than those working less, and students with family commitments (caring for children or elderly parents) were also less likely to graduate than students without family commitments. Similar findings were also found by Cuthbertson, Lauder, Steele,

Cleary, Bradshaw [16] and Steele, Lauder, Caperchione, Anastasi [17].

The type of work nursing students performed has also been examined. Many nursing student sought employment in nursing-related positions thinking this would have a positive impact on their performance as a student [2006]. It has been viewed by some that employment in a health care setting may be seen as an opportunity to enhance skills, giving the student a broader clinical experience [1,9,13,18]. However, the type of employment, nursing or non-nursing related, did not change the negative effect that working had on academic performance [14,19]. Given the demanding workload expected of students in nursing programs, the effects of nursing students having outside employment in addition to the impact on academic achievement also needs to be considered. Norman et al. [4] report that two thirds of nursing students interviewed stated they had difficulty maintaining a “balance” between the “rigorous” and “demanding” program requirements and other aspects of their lives. Many reported being “overwhelmed” from “juggling” school, work, and a home life, some having family demands and younger students feeling that they were missing out of campus activities. This “juggling” often leads to higher stress levels, fatigue, a feeling of inadequate time to submit assignments in a timely manner, missing classes, a decrease in overall attentiveness and a decrease in social and leisure activities [2,6,8,]. Dante et al. [7] cautions that “patients may feel insecure if they are cared for by tired students, even if the latter are assisted by a qualified nurse”. An issue of student availability is raised by Ferguson and Cerinus [1] in that students may not be available (i.e. throughout a 24-hour period) to access care delivery outside of “normal” course hours if students are working.

## Methodology

A quantitative study was completed with 100 undergraduate nursing students at a private college in the northeast United States. Students were asked to complete a ten question Survey Monkey tool via online. The students were asked the following information: age, gender, head of household status, whether they were employed, average number of hours worked per week, did they work in a healthcare setting, when did they usually work (weekday, weekends, time of day), current academic year, how many credits per semester, recent GPA, and if employed how would they describe the level of stress they are experiencing being a student working. The students were given one week to complete the task.

## Results

100 students responded via survey monkey. Ages of respondents were: 18-20, 32%; 21-24, 31%; 25-30, 16%; 31-34, 6%; 35-44, 11% and 45-64, 4%. 90% of the respondents were female, 10% male. Of these respondents, 34% reported that they were the head of a household, and 13% had dependent children. 65% do work, with 40% working in healthcare settings. Of those who do work, on the average: 25% work 21-25 hours, 23.9% work 31 or more hours per week (Table 1). When asked when they work, 28% work weekends, and 33.7% work weekday evenings. 35.5% are

in their junior year (3rd year students), and 28% are sophomores (2nd year students). Respondents were asked the number of credits they carried the previous semester, 42% carried 13 to 15 credits per semester. The most recent semester's GPA was asked, 39.39% reported having a GPA range from 3.1 to 3.5, with 24.24% stating they have 2.6 to 3.0 GPA. When asked about the stress they experience working and going to school, 47.87% stated that they are overwhelmed, with 45% stating that they experience moderate stress levels (Table 2). Similar results were reported by Norman et al. [4].

Table: Hours Worked Per Week (n=92) Hours Worked Per Week	n	%
5 to 10	5	5.43
11 to 15	10	10.87
16 to 20	21	22.83
21 to 25	23	25
26 to 30	11	11.96
31 or more	22	23.91

**Table 1:** Hours Worked Per Week (n=92).

Amount of Stress	n	%
Slight	6	6.38
Moderate	43	45.74
Overwhelmed	45	47.87

**Table 2:** Level of Stress Experienced (n=94).

## Conclusion

While this study was insightful, as there is very limited current nursing literature on the topic, more research should be conducted to really understand the relationship between work and academic performance. It appears that students need to work and do feel overwhelmed when doing so. It also appears that their working does not have notable impact on their academic performance. Nursing educators need to be aware of the need to work, and the potential impact on the student. This imbalance may have long-term ramifications for students in terms of both licensure and competency to practice. As mentioned by Schoofs et al. [15] "although students may not experience the effect of work hours on their current academic status, if they do not have adequate study time, they may be less prepared both to take the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) and function competently in various work settings".

As current economic conditions dictate, there will be an increasing number of students who need to work in order to enroll and continue in nursing programs. However, the challenge nursing faculty will be faced with, is how to assist these students to meet the increasing demands of having to master more and more information being placed in these programs and the increasing amount of time it will take them to study with their working responsibilities. Will the student continue to be successful in the nursing programs? Will this lead more students to drop down to a part time enrollment status and therefore prolong the length of time for them to complete

a program? Perhaps it is time for nursing faculty to embrace the student and their need to work to meet their financial obligations and offer assistance and creative ways to meet these challenges. Faculty need to be challenged and to be innovative in thinking of ways to allow the student to be successful in school and still be able to maintain a job.

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