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## Working Students: What Higher Education Needs to Know

By *Laura Mullane*

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The gap between what we think and what we know about working students may be larger than we think—that's the assertion of a recent report issued by the Center for the Study of Work at [Old Dominion University](#) in Norfolk, Virginia.

Titled *Working Lives of College Students*, the report is based on a survey of 900 of Old Dominion's 20,000-plus undergraduates at its main campus in Norfolk and at more than 40 distance learning sites in Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Virginia, and Washington state. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, [Work First, Study Second: Adult Undergraduates Who Combine Employment and Postsecondary Enrollment](#), provided a useful starting point for the research project.

### Old Dominion University's Center for the Study of Work (CSW)

Through educational, outreach, and action research activities, the Center advances cross-sector collaboration to highlight workforce education needs. It will also work with campus and off-campus partners to mount regional and national forums on work and the role of higher education.

"What seems so amazing is that something like work, that is so central to everyone's lives, is so tangential to higher education," says Lombardo. "We think that CSW can have a place in drawing attention and giving centrality to the place of our working lives. The study, *Working Lives of Students*, is a start in that direction."

The project was the brainchild of Leon Bouvier, who teaches the Sociology Department's capstone research course at Old Dominion, and Lucien Lombardo, a professor in Old Dominion's Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice and coordinator of the Center for the Study of Work. Bouvier and Lombardo wanted to explore how students balanced the multiple demands of school, work, and family. "This was something I felt most of us in higher education knew very little about and to which we paid little attention," says Lombardo. "We often hear state-level government officials, legislators, and even many in higher education administration complain about the seemingly low four- and five-year graduation rates. I always have the feeling when I hear these discussions that [they think] the only thing college students have to do is go to class."

The study confirmed Lombardo's hunch: "It was clear to me that the undergraduate life of living in a dorm for four years and taking classes was not a luxury most students could afford. Indeed, it was not the way study, family, and work interacted." Further, it underscores a growing national trend: the blurring of lines between "traditional" and "nontraditional" students. Indeed, working at least part time is a reality for most of the [new majority](#) students, who make up 75 percent of the undergraduate population at U.S. colleges and universities.

Bouvier and Lombardo began their research with the help of 33 undergraduates who were part of the sociology capstone research project. Inexperienced in research methods, these students were assigned to learn about social science research by studying something of interest. Work was a natural choice: Every student in the class had a paying job (or jobs) off

campus, working 20 hours or more, many full time. In addition, many of the full-time workers also were full-time students. Clearly, studying the impact of work on student life resonated deeply with these researchers.

The students identified a range of conceptual themes to guide their research, including motivations for working; the work-study-family balance; and work, family, and academic supports for study.

## The Respondents

Of the 900 students surveyed, 66 percent took classes primarily at Old Dominion's Norfolk campus and 33 percent were from distance learning sites. "Though there are variations between distance learning and on-campus students, over 50 percent of each group work 20 hours or more per week," says Lombardo.

The age range of respondents spanned from 18 years to over 40, with significant variations depending on whether the students took classes at the Norfolk campus or at a distance learning site. In fact, 83 percent of Norfolk campus students surveyed were 18 to 24 years of age; in comparison, 45 percent of sample students at the distance learning sites were 25 to 40 years of age, and 35 percent were over 40.

For nearly 60 percent of respondents, neither parent had earned an undergraduate degree.

## The Findings

One of the most important questions asked by researchers concerned students' motivations for working. Not surprisingly, the expense of school was a major motivator: Just over 70 percent of both groups of students (from the Norfolk campus and distance learning sites) said paying for school expenses was an "important" or "very important" motivation for working. Supporting family was also important, but more so for the distance learning students than for those on campus. In fact, more than three-quarters of the distance learning students said supporting their immediate family was an important motivator, while just half of the Norfolk students said the same thing. Further, the need to gain work experience was cited as a motivator among 49 percent of the Norfolk students and 63 percent of the distance learning students.

Researchers also wanted to know how students balanced the competing demands of work, school, and family. "Not surprisingly, we found that for many of our students, negotiating the complexities of these multiple and simultaneous roles is very difficult, stressful, and takes a toll," says Lombardo. More than one-third of both groups of students reported that their physical and emotional health, social and family life, school work, and grades suffer from trying to juggle these roles.

Despite these stresses, students reported that they received some support for their educational pursuits from both work and family. About three-quarters of on-campus and distance learning students said that their employers offered flexible schedules to accommodate their studies. Financial support from employers, however, was less common. Only 10 percent of on-campus students' employers and 40 percent of distance learning students' employers reimbursed tuition costs.

It's also interesting to note that, although on-campus students receive more financial assistance from their families than do distance learning students, nearly half of on-campus students pay their own tuition. The fact that so many 18- to 24-year-olds are taking greater financial responsibility for their education further debunks the myth of the "typical" full-time student who does nothing but study, go to class, and socialize.

Support from the university is also critical to working students' success. But students' opinions of that support were mixed. Lombardo noted that he and other faculty members often hear stories and complaints about the lack of support and flexibility for working students. Thus, the professors and their student researchers were surprised that only 10 to 25 percent of the respondents indicated that they "never" or "rarely" encountered such supports.

While finding less dissatisfaction than they expected, the researchers also learned that just 39 percent of on-campus students and 57 percent of distance learning students said faculty were “often” or “always” flexible and supportive. And only half of both groups said classes were easy to work into their schedules. These findings are not unique to Old Dominion University. [National studies](#) of institutional support for working students have shown similar results and, consequently, similar implications. Specifically, while colleges and universities have made considerable strides in supporting nontraditional students, significant service gaps continue to exist.

## Lessons Learned

Perhaps the greatest lesson to come out of this study, says Lombardo, is the need for more research. “Our survey data help outline the dimensions and shape of the undergraduate student working life experience,” he says. “However, there is much to be learned about [undergraduate] coping strategies and working life career paths.”

He adds, “Too often, we have focused on value-added assessment, which focuses on students when they come into our institutions of higher learning and when they leave. However, I think focusing on the intersections of learning with life-work and experiences can be incredibly valuable in helping students, faculty, and administrators develop a more engaged and less detached approach to what they do.”

Finally, Lombardo adds that a better understanding [through research] of working students can help postsecondary institutions serve them better. “At Old Dominion, we have been dealing with flexibility issues for a long time,” he says. “We have recognized experiential learning; we have tried to offer programs in evening and daytime contexts; we have developed weekend college options and a variety of locations; we employ our live, interactive distance learning options to support ‘place-bound’ students in Virginia and around the country; and we are working on ways of integrating more online experiences. Even with all of this, there are [additional] ways I am sure that our ‘adult students’ can inform us to try.”

And by “informing us to try,” these working students can help colleges and universities become true institutions of lifelong learning—promoting the continuum of education during every step of every student’s life.

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