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# Exploring the Nexus of Students' Academic and Employment Experiences

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EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND EMPLOYMENT  
EXPERIENCES

by

Ryan M. Patterson

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
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# EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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This thesis focuses on the experiences of college students who are balancing the multiple responsibilities of a full-time student while concurrently being employed 20 hours or more a week. Literature related to the experience of working students provided some insight regarding the impact of work on academics, however, previous research relied primarily on quantitative data. The research that exists largely fails to represent the voices of working students. The results of this study contribute to the literature by describing the positive and negative experiences that exist for students at the nexus of their academics and employment.

Using a qualitative, collective case study approach, four students participated in two semi-structured interviews and provided several documents for analysis. Rich, thick descriptions were used to describe the experiences of students as individual cases. Cross-case analysis was used additionally to find the similarities and differences between the collection of cases. The nexus of academics and employment was discovered to be a potent place for students. Participants recognized educational benefits from employment, however, they were also challenged with having less time to put towards academic activities. Implications are provided for higher education professionals who work with students who are employed. Also included are recommendations for future research regarding the experiences of these students.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Owen, a first-year, in-state student, at a public four-year university, worries about how he is going to manage his time spending it between academics and employment next semester. He is enrolled as a full-time student and was allocated a \$7,500 financial aid package for the semester consisting of grants, loans, and scholarships. This covers what he needs to pay his tuition and fees (\$4,700) but leaves him with only \$2,800 to pay for his on-campus residence hall bill of approximately \$9,000. His family is already helping support him by giving him \$100 a month to help with living expenses but they are unable to assist more. Recognizing that he had to come up with an additional \$6,200, he has decided that he can pay for approximately \$3,000 (after-taxes) by working 24 hours a week off-campus at a local call center where he can make \$9 an hour. As for the additional \$3,200, Owen has no option but to take out a loan from a private company at a 6% interest rate.

Owen is enrolled in 14 credit hours for next semester, with two courses being ones that others on his floor have warned him about because of the difficulty. These students shared with Owen that the professors of the two courses expect students to treat their classes like full-time jobs if they want to get a good grade. Owen is not looking forward to these classes because he doesn't have that much time with his work schedule to devote toward just two classes. He has no option though and has decided he will just try as hard as he can to be successful.

### **Background of the Problem**

Unfortunately, Owen is not an anomaly on college campuses across the United States. The amount of unmet need students face, "the financial need after expected family contribution and all discounts, grants, and loans are exhausted (Cahalan & Perna, 2015, p. 22), is

commonplace across the country. In 2012, students from families in the bottom and second lowest income quartiles faced an average of \$8,221 and \$6,514 respectively (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Students from these two income quartiles make up approximately 52% of students attending public four-year doctoral institutions which is similar to all four-year public or private institutions.

Students facing this situation often have no other option but employment to help make up the difference in financial need. Approximately 75% of all dependent students work while concurrently enrolled in college at an average of 24 hours a week (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006). A study conducted by King and Bannon (2002) showed that 63% of all full-time students stated they would not be able to afford college if not for the money earned while working (King & Bannon, 2002).

Although there are numerous differing perspectives in the literature, as a whole the evidence collected thus far shows that students who work a considerable number of hours (20+) have lower grade point averages (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006; Huie, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014). Similar to academic success, persistence and retention of working students is also contested in the literature. The general consensus however is that as students work more hours, a curvilinear effect exists for their persistence, with retention rates decreasing at the 15-20 hour threshold (Boznick, 2007; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although a multitude of research exists on the negative impacts of work on academics, very little research exists to explain why that is the case. Another perspective that has not been fully explored in the literature is the idea that work can be positively beneficial for students' academic success. A few studies have found that working students had a better appreciation for

the content learned in class due to their ability to connect concepts from work and academics (Kramer & Usher, 2011; Robotham, 2012), however, these studies are quantitative in nature and do not provide an understanding of why that might be the case. This current study was created in order to answer questions about the positive and negative benefits recognized from the nexus of students' academic and employment experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to describe the nexus between academic and employment experiences of undergraduate students at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwestern United States. The population identified for this study was students who work for 20 hours or more a week. Throughout the study, I have defined working 20 hours or more a week a considerable amount. This was selected as the criteria due to the literature that expressed exacerbated negative impacts of work on academics and persistence for students who work above the 20 hours a week threshold.

To understand the experiences of students working 20 or more hours a week, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do students describe their academic experiences while employed during the school year?
2. How do students describe their employment experiences while maintaining full-time student status?
3. How do students describe the connection between their academic and employment experiences?

Through inquiring about the students' academic experiences, experiences at work, and their interactions with faculty and co-workers, this research sought to understand the connections between work and school.

### **Significance of the Study**

Working a considerable number of hours during college has a definite impact on students' experience of college, in particular their ability to succeed academically. Although researchers have fully explored work's impact on students quantitatively, very little qualitative literature exists. Therefore, this study is formative in establishing a body of research that highlights the voices of working students and their experiences.

A deficiency in the literature additionally existed in identifying if and to what extent a connection exists between working students and their academics. Previous literature has discussed how employment can be beneficial to students' skill development however very little has been documented about the positive impacts of work on students' academics. Through a qualitative approach, questions about any connection whether positive or negative were able to be addressed and explained in depth.

This study is additionally unique in that it focuses entirely on students who work more than 20 hours a week. Distinguishing only students working more than 20 hours serves as a discernable difference due to the notion in the literature that working some hours (around 10) can have positive impacts on academics and persistence. Eliminating the population of students that works less than 20 hours a week in this study sought to create more consistent responses and experiences from participants.

The results from this study will be beneficial to faculty, student affairs professionals, administrators, and policy makers. With most students in a faculty member's classroom having

work experience, this study will provide faculty with a greater understanding of their students' experiences and how their students connect academic concepts to their work experiences. This study serves as an impetus for faculty to know the extent of their students work experiences and find ways to incorporate students' employment experiences into the delivery or discussion of content to maximize students' learning.

Furthermore, this research will be beneficial to student affairs professionals in multiple functional areas. When student affairs professionals interact with students daily, they can have a more informed perspective of what the students are experiencing at work. Their conversations when helping students can be focused on connecting work experiences with academic content to assist in their understanding of work as a beneficial learning opportunity. This study will be of particular relevance to career services professionals who consistently interact with employers. Individuals working in employer relations within a career services office can use this information as a launch point in discussing ways in which internships and part-time job opportunities can be shaped into opportunities for the furthering of students' knowledge learned in the classroom. Lastly, administrators and policy makers can use this information when determining policies on financial aid, scholarships, or programs offered to students on campus. An in-depth description of students' experiences at work can illuminate new perspectives of how these students manage their dual role of student and employee.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm and a collective case study methodology and examined the academic and employment experiences of working students. This approach was selected due to its ability to allow me to co-construct knowledge with my participants. The constructivist approach also allowed me to gain a deep understanding and

description of students' experiences (Mertens, 2015). Using the collective case study approach, I was able to study the experiences of four students in depth and analyze similarities and contradictions across cases (Stake, 2006). Data were collected through (a) two 30-60 minute semi-structured interviews and document analysis of (b) photographs taken by participants, (c) participants current and previous semesters' course schedules, and (d) participant's typical weekly schedule including work, class and other planned activities. Four cases were purposefully chosen based on their ability to provide diversity across contexts (Stake, 2006).

### **Delimitations**

Through the use of the collective case study methodology, specific boundaries were determined around the set of cases which served as delimitations of the research. Cases were selected based on participants meeting the following criteria: full-time student status with at least 27 credit hours completed, at least 19 years of age, and working for 20 hours or more a week. This study focused on students who had completed 27 credit hours or more due to an interest in students who had completed the majority of their general education courses and had moved more into their major specific courses. This intentional choice was made due to the assumption that students may work in areas that more closely align with their major allowing for a more pronounced connection between students' academics and employment. Another boundary set for this study was the age minimum for participants. Working students who were under the age of 19 were deliberately excluded from this study because of age consent laws in the state Midwestern University is located.

When designing the research study, I choose to use the threshold for the number of hours worked as greater than or equal to twenty for several reasons. Determining a threshold of hours worked was important for me in providing clear findings. Numerous studies previously



conducted in the literature found varying results about the impact of employment on students' experiences due to the fact that a curvilinear relationship is hypothesized to exist when considering the number of hours students work. These studies convoluted the conclusions one could make from the research. The amount of twenty hours was decided upon due to evidence in the literature that described the negative impacts of employment on these students' academic experiences but positive developmental gains in a variety of skill areas. Lastly, I choose to explore the experiences of students who work more than 20 hours a week because if the cost of higher education continues to outpace the financial aid offered, today's students will work at higher rates for an increased number of hours than students in previous decades. It is important for higher education professionals to understand more clearly how employment impacts students.

Other delimitations included the location and timeframe of the study. All participants were enrolled as students at the same public university in the Midwest. This delimitation was made to ensure consistency in interpreting any influence the institution may have had on the participants' experiences. The data collection for the study was conducted over the course of one semester creating an intensified view of students' experiences during a small window of time.

### **Limitations**

Similar to any research study, limitations within the study exist as a result of methodological decisions made when designing the research. This study included the voices of four working undergraduate students. This number of cases falls within the recommended range for collective case studies however, four is on the lower end of the range. Including an increased number of participants would have allowed the study to contain additional perspectives and examples about the experiences of working students.

Another limitation that affected this study was time. The completion of this study was a requirement necessary for my graduation. As such, the study was conducted within one academic year. This short time frame limited the number of participants that could be recruited. This also limited the extent of data collection, with an increased amount of time, additional interviews or observations of the students at work or in class could have completed. The actual amount of time spent interacting with participants occurred over a one-month span which could have limited the relationship developed between myself and participants. Had additional time been available, a deeper relationship could have been established which could have changed the selectivity of the information participants shared with me.

Although all four participants in this study had different majors, each had a connection to business coursework. Three of the participants had majors in the university's College of Business and the fourth had a minor in business. This relationship with business coursework could have impacted the data that were collected and the transferability to other students. Although an intentional effort was taken to include the voices of students within different academic disciplines, additional potential participants were not identified. Although it was not a criterion when selecting cases for this study, another potential limitation with the participants' was that an unequal representation of women came forward with interest in participating in the study. Three of the four participants identified as female. Similarly, all participants in the study identified as white. The findings of this study could have potentially been different had a more diverse group of students participated in the study.

### **Assumptions**

When conducting this research, it is important to note there were several assumptions made. Regarding ontology, I assumed that multiple realities existed for the participants in this

study. The manner in which one participant described their academics, work, and the connection of these two differed depending on the reality faced by each specific participant. Epistemological assumptions were made in that I recognize that the findings presented are dependent upon my worldview and the way I asked questions during the semi-structured interviews. The interviewer and the interviewee mutually influenced each other throughout the study. Further, I approached this study with a value-laden axiology. Specifically, intentionality was taken to establish trust and respect creating a rapport between myself and the participants. Through the creation of rapport, I assumed that the participants were honest and open in their responses.

Several assumptions were also made about the population of students studied. The basic assumption made for this population was that they worked for one of two reasons, these being financial or experience related. The literature suggests that the primary reason students work is due to financial reasons although there are some students who work for the sole purpose of gaining relevant work experience. The assumption was made that the participants shared the same views as those previously studied and were motivated to work due to some combination of financial motivation or a desire to gain experience.

Additionally, I approached this study with the assumption that working over 20 hours a week had a significant impact on the way in which these students experienced and viewed their college experience. Due to working a considerable amount of hours, it was assumed that these students' typical weekly schedules look much different than those of their peers who do not work as many hours. This belief was formed by existing literature about working students' academic and co-curricular experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the nexus of students' academic and employment experiences for students who work a considerable amount of hours contributing the addition of students' voice to the literature. Furthermore, this study creates a foundation for other researchers to explore the how employment interacts with students' success academically. Higher education professionals strive for each student to achieve, however, they have been ignoring the positive and negative impacts employment has on students' time in college.

In the second chapter, relevant literature on the impact employment has on students' will be discussed. The literature for many of the areas covered is unsettled and researchers are still seeking to present clear evidence describing employment's impact. Chapter Three will describe the methodology used in this study including the implications a collective case study had on the manner in which this study was conducted. The fourth chapter presents the themes that emerged from this research from analysis of field notes, interview transcripts, and the documents provided by the participants. Finally, Chapter 5 states the findings from this research study connected with the literature outlined in Chapter 2. Also discussed in Chapter 5 are the recommendations for higher education professionals about how to better serve full-time students who work a considerable number of hours and areas that exist for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Cost of Higher Education

The increasing cost of higher education across the United States has caused challenges for students to meet the financial requirements of attending college. The average cost of tuition and fees for attending a public four-year college or university during the 1971-72 academic year was \$428, which is a stark contrast to \$9,410, the average price for the current year 2015-16 (College Board, 2016). This figures provided by College Board (2016) document an increase in cost represents an estimated 2098.6% increase in cost which is shocking when compared to 510.9% increase in the Consumer Price Index over the same time period (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Even when controlling for overall inflation costs, College Board (2016) still listed an increase of 275% since 1971-72 or an estimated 3.14% per year.

While the cost of education was rising drastically, the amount of federal aid received by low-income students was unable to keep pace. Three years after the creation of the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant, later renamed the Pell Grant, (The Pell Institute) the portion of the cost of attendance for four-year public universities reached its highest at 85% for students receiving the maximum amount awarded (College Board, 1998). The percentage of the cost of attendance that the maximum amount of the Pell Grant covered diminished significantly throughout its history. In the 1990-91 academic year only 45% of tuition and fees and room and board were covered (College Board, 2010) and this amount has now subsided to 30% which equates to \$5,775 (College Board, 2015b).

For low income students who do receive the maximum Pell grant of \$5,775 this amount doesn't go far. The aggregate cost of higher education for students is staggering. Students' this

2015-16 academic year are anticipated to spend \$24,061 between \$9,410 for tuition and fees, \$10,138 for room and board, \$1,298 for books and supplies, \$1,109 for transportation, and \$2,106 for additional uncategorized expenses (College Board, 2015b).

In order to cover these costs, students have a combination of components possible for their financial aid package. Students enrolled in 2014-15 “received an average of \$14,210 in aid including \$8,170 grants from all sources, \$4,800 in federal loans, and \$1,240 in a combination of tax credits and deductions and Federal Work-Study” (College Board, 2015c, p.11). This leaves just under \$10,000 for the average student to make up through family contributions, private loans, or work.

Unfortunately, many students’ families are not capable of carrying this additional financial burden. While higher education costs have increased and Pell Grant funding decreased over the years, higher education became even more challenging for students to afford as mean family incomes did not come close to matching the increase in cost of tuition and fees. From 1984 to 2014 the lowest 20% of families had a change of -1% of income when adjusting for inflation (College Board, 2015b). The other income brackets were not as bleak, with College Board (2015b) finding the second quintile received an increase of 9%, the third quintile increased by 16%, the fourth quintile increased by 25%, and the highest 20% increased by 51%. Even with these increases in family income, percent increased still did not match the increase in the cost of education. Students or their families who do not have the accumulated wealth necessary to afford higher education are left with few options. Many students turn towards employment while concurrently enrolled full time, to make up the difference.

Additionally, regarding students’ families ability to support their students in school, students from lower income families were less likely to have college savings plans established

prior to their student attending college. Families with incomes less than \$100,000 represented 82% of all families of dependent college students who did not have a college savings account. This differed from other income categories where students with families earning between \$100,000 – \$150,000 and \$150,000 or higher comprised 9% and 8% of the families who did not have college savings accounts (College Board, 2015, p. 40).

The amount families are able to contribute to their students' college costs depends on several factors including the amount they had in savings. Choy and Berker (2002) identified the average expected family contribution to be \$1,500 and \$9,000 for low income and middle income families respectively, who had students attending a public doctoral university. More recently, in 2013-14, students who received Pell grants had zero expected family contributions (College Board, 2015). The difference in cost of attendance less expected family contribution is considered unmet financial need (Perna, Cooper, Li, 2006). The amount of unmet need varied vastly dependent upon the income quartile the family was located in. In 2012, for students in the top income quartile, a surplus of \$13,950 was expected whereas students in the lowest income quartile had an estimated \$8,221 of unmet financial need (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). In order to make up this difference of financial need, low income students and their families resort to other additional sources including private loans and employment (King & Bannon, 2002).

According to College Board (2015), in 2013-14 60% of college graduates earned their degree by taking on debt. Of students who received loans including both federal and non-federal loans, the average amount of debt graduated with was \$25,500 at public four-year institutions. Both figures of percentage of students graduating with debt and the average amount of debt accrued by graduation increased from years prior, even when holding prices consistent. In 2008-09, 55% of graduates had debt at an average rate of \$22,400.

## **Student Employment Levels**

Numerous studies have been conducted about students working behaviors with a majority of them concluding that most students in college are working. Hakes's (2010) study of 1,400 full-time students in their junior and senior years at eleven institutions around the United States found that approximately 36% of students did not work, 31% worked 1-20 hours a week, and 33% worked greater than 20 hours per week. Another study using data from across the United States found that students are working at a high percentage. Perna, Cooper, & Li (2006) analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Their analysis indicated that the vast majority of both independent and dependent students work, with employment levels being 75.2% and 80% respectively, across all types of university settings (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006).

Several studies determining the cause of work have been completed with results identifying financial need as the primary driving force. King and Bannon (2002) found that 63% of all full-time students who work stated that they would not be able to afford college if not for the compensation received from employment. Research conducted internationally also indicates that this is not just an issue faced by higher education institutions in the United States. Curtis and Williams, (2002) in a study of students at an institution in the United Kingdom, identified that 95% of working students stated their reason for working was due to financial reasons with most stating without part-time work they would not be able to stay enrolled in higher education.

Although the literature is clear on students turning to work for financial reasons, less clear are the demographics of these working students. Using data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Stern and Nakata (1991) described the differences in the gender of working students from the late 1950's to the late 1980s. Over this time span, a greater percentage of men



were working than women, although the gap between genders had nearly vanished by end of the data set. More recently however, Hakes (2010) stated that there is not a significant difference between genders on the number of hours worked as a student. This finding was determined through the evaluation of the data from eleven institutions on the College Student Experiences Questionnaire.

Differing from the study by Hakes (2010), Lang (2012) stated that men tend to work more hours than women, however women work at greater rates based on institutional specific data from the National Survey of Student Engagement. Further convoluting the matter, Greene and Maags (2015) found in their study that females spent more time on employment than males according to data at one institution using the University Life Study. Greene and Maags' (2015) claim is also supported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) which stated that gender did play an impact in determining levels of work due to female college students being more likely than male college students to work. The specific determination of whether there were gender differences in the amount that students work was disputed in the literature. What was evident from the literature is that women students are working at higher rates than in previous decades in the United States (Stern and Nakata, 1991; Lang, 2012; Greene & Maags, 2015).

Demographic variables including income level, race/ethnicity, and year in school also varied when observing students who work. Unsurprisingly, students coming to college from low-income families were found to be more likely to work (Boznick, 2007). As proven by previous research, family income level is also strongly correlated to educational achievement of parent(s) (College Board, 2015b). Green and Maags (2015) found this link to be present in an additional way in that first-generation college students spent more time working than did students who had a parent with a college degree. Also related to income level and college attainment is race and

ethnicity. Previous research has identified that students of color are more likely to come from low-income families (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). Again this impact is seen through the amount of time students of color spend working. Multiple studies found that students of color spend more time working than Caucasian students (Green & Maags, 2015; Lang, 2012)

Another factor that was correlated with a greater amount of working was the students' year in school. Lang (2012) found that students who were in their junior or senior year were 1.3 times as likely to work as first-year students and sophomores (p. 251). Hakes (2010) took this a step further in a study of juniors and seniors finding that seniors worked a greater amount than juniors.

### **Academics**

Studies about the impact of work on college students' academics have produced mixed results. Despite much attention given to the topic by researchers, the impact of work on students' success is equivocal. Varying studies in the literature have found work to have a positive impact, negative impact, no effect, or some combination depending on the amount of hours worked.

Numerous studies have found results in line with the most prevalent beliefs of higher education professionals (King, 2006; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006) that work negatively impacts college grades. In one of the largest studies using data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS), researchers found a negative correlation between the number of hours students worked and the grades they received (King & Bannon, 2002). This study found particularly strong correlations between employment and academics when students worked over 25 hours a week. These students were nearly twice as likely to identify a negative impact on their academic experience due to work (King & Bannon, 2002).

Several researchers have duplicated this finding in various institution specific studies. Huie, Winsler, and Kitsantas (2014) identified the difference in their study on first year students at a large mid-Atlantic state university. Similarly, Cheng and Alcantra (2004) found there to be a statistically significant difference between all working and non-working students in average grade point average in their study at a large selective research university. Two studies didn't just state that a difference existed but explained the direct impact of the hours worked as linear. Wenz, Yu, and Choun's (2010) study at a public regional university in the northern Midwest found that students' grade point average fell .004 points for every hour worked (Wenz, Yu, Choun, 2010). Richardson, Kemp, Malinen, & Haultain (2012) found a similar linear relationship and calculated that working students would have on average half letter grade (example B to B+) in their courses if they were not working.

Qualitative studies of the impact on work have provided interesting insight into how aware students are of the impact work has on their academic success. Moreau and Leatherwood (2006) described their participants' experiences of balancing work and school as a struggle. These students were keenly aware of how challenging it was to juggle multiple commitments and recognized that it was damaging to their success as students. Conversely, in Cheng and Alcantra's (2004) study, when students were asked in focus groups they did not believe working had an impact on their academic success, however quantitative analysis of grade point averages proved otherwise. This research found that when speaking of work's impact on grades, participants in focus groups were "either unaware of, or refused to admit, the fact that their academic performance is somewhat compromised" (Chang and Alcantra, 2004, p. 16). Although proven contrary to these students' impression of work's impact on their success, research exists that supports the views expressed in the focus groups.

One such study that contradicted the notion of work causing a negative impact took the approach of measuring students' cognitive development in areas of reading comprehension, mathematics, critical thinking, writing skills, and science reasoning (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, Terenzini, 1998). This longitudinal study measured the cognitive development of participants over a three year time period at 23 colleges and universities across the United States. Little evidence was found overall demonstrating students' employment on or off campus limited students' learning or cognitive growth.

When focusing the data on the specific academic class standing of participants, researchers found there to be elements of work that impacted cognitive development in the participants' third-year at the university. When testing for a curvilinear effect on cognitive development based on the number of hours participants were employed, working 11-15 hours per week on campus or 16-20 hours per week off-campus produced a net positive effect on cognitive development. Working greater than 11-15 hours on campus or 16-20 hours off-campus per week had a net negative impact on participants' cognitive scores. This curvilinear effect was not present in the data for the participants' first or second years attending higher education, leading to the possible conclusion that students' have been able to successfully manage and integrate their work into their academics by their third year (Pascarella et al., 1998). This study provided data to support the notion that on- or off-campus employment may not restrain one's intellectual growth rather, working can actually enhance learning in some instances.

Although grades are not synonymous with cognitive development, there is a perceived correlation that exists between the two. Research that specifically outlines all employment as beneficial in regards to grade point average was not located in the literature. Several studies did argue that work is positively correlated with academic success up to a certain number hours of

work per week. Applegate and Daly (2006) found students had increased academic success marginally per hour of employment up to eleven hours per week. Once that point was reached, the positive benefits of employment began to decline and once twenty-two hours were worked, students were worse off than they would have been not working at all (Applegate and Daly, 2006). Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley (2008) and Kulm and Cramer (2006) similarly found work to be beneficial up to a certain point although differing slightly in the exact number of hours worked to recognize work's benefits. Pike et al.'s (2008) study using data collected from over 55,000 first-year students attending over 390 institutions used ordinal data instead of continuous and therefore were unable to find an exact point at which employment transitioned from benefiting students' success to harming it. The category of students who worked on campus for less than 20 hours a week had significantly higher grades than those in the other categories of the data. Kulm and Cramer's (2006) research was congruent except finding a threshold of 11-20 hours on campus being the number of hours worked by students who had higher GPA's.

Studies in the literature postulate work's impact is similarly dependent upon the number of hours worked except these findings focus on the point at which work becomes deleterious to students' success academically. Research conducted by Pike et al. (2008) on first-year students across the United States detected that working 20 hours a week was negatively correlated with grades compared with students who did not work or those that worked 20 or fewer hours on or off campus even when controlling for students' backgrounds and campus engagement levels. The negative correlation was more pronounced for these students than for who worked less than 20 hours per week considering they did not experience any negative effects on their grades. Working students were able to be employed a few more hours on average per week before it impacted grades negatively, according to Applegate and Daly (2006) in their study of students at

a public university in Australia. The threshold of twenty-two hours worked per week was found to be the point at which employment decreased academic success.

A possible explanation for the differing impact employment has on students' academics is what is known as the time trade-off hypothesis. This concept states that due to time's finite nature individuals must choose between one activity or the other and the activity they choose will therefore decrease the amount of time they can spend on the other activity (Safron, Schulenberg, & Bachman, 2001). The time trade-off perspective was found in effect by multiple studies where when college students worked more they decreased the amount of time spent on academics (Greene and Maggs, 2015; Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Baum, 2005). This hypothesis would lead to an acceptable explanation that students who work less substantial amounts are able to receive benefit compared to those who work a considerable amount. Up to a certain point students are able to replace their non-academic time with work until all that is left to tradeoff is time spent doing educationally related activities such as studying or reading for courses.

In contrast to the time-trade off hypothesis, using data from nearly 800 first-year and senior students collected through the National Survey of Student Engagement from one mid-sized public university in the United States, Lang (2012) identified that working students committed an equal amount of time to their studies when compared to their non-working peers. Lang postulated that the non-working students didn't study more because they used their time for more leisure or other activities working students did not spend time on. This finding contradicts what was found previously by Safron et al. (2001) and Baum (2005) who found evidence of an inverse relationship between amount of time students spent working and amount of time committed towards academics.

Lang (2012) is one of several researchers that disagrees with any type of impact on academics due to students' work experiences. Lang's (2012) study found there to be no significant effect on grades when comparing working and non-working students' self-reported cumulative college grades. Similarly, using data from nearly 250 full-time students at a public university in Australia, Bradley's (2006) study found no evidence of a difference in the academic success of students who worked and those who did not. The correlation in this study was close to zero throughout all hours worked contradicting previous research about the existence of a threshold of number of hours worked that causes a detriment to academic success. Lang (2012) also argued that the threshold theory was nonexistent. Other researchers also discovered no impact on academics due to work in their studies (Alfano and Eduljee, 2010; Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diekhoff, 2013).

Determining the actual effect of work on academic success is not an easy task due to the ambiguity present in the numerous studies on this topic. A convergence of numerous factors occurs in the formation of a student's experience in employment. These factors include the total number of hours worked per week, the location of the employment, and the age and academic class standing of the student when working. The inconclusiveness of the literature is likely due to methodological differences between how studies have evaluated these factors when forming conclusions (McCormick, Moore, & Kuh, 2010). Varying studies classify each of these factors differently, causing interpretation to be challenging across the entirety of the literature. For example, some studies classify work as dichotomous and only measure whether students worked or not, whereas other studies use ordinal data to measure the number of hours work, and yet further causing more ambiguity some studies use the exact number of hours worked (McCormick et al., 2010) Differences such as these create an enigma in the literature. Even such, the takeaway

from the evidence presented in the literature is that work isn't necessary detrimental to students' academic success and that other perspectives exist that state work can have a positive impact in helping students develop intellectually.

**Beyond class interactions with peers and faculty.** One area that has been thoroughly documented as positively correlated with learning is the amount of time students spend interacting with peers and faculty about course material (Astin, 1985; Bean, 1985; Kuh, 2003). Although not conclusively proven in the literature, some studies have positively linked participating in work with increased levels of peer and faculty interactions. One such study conducted in Australia used data from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), which has formal links to the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) used in the United States. In this study, Coates (2013) analyzed responses from nearly 26,000 participants and found that students participating in paid work “reported higher levels of active learning, interactions with academic staff, and engagement in enriching educational experiences” (p.74). Correspondingly, Hakes (2010) analyzed 1,400 students across eleven institutions in the United States and found that students who worked 1-20 hours a week engaged in significantly more discussions beyond the classroom with faculty and peers than students who did not work. Hakes (2010) did not find any other significant differences for the student population that didn't work or that worked more than 20 hours per week.

Similar results were found by Pike et al. (2008), in their analysis of results from the NSSE which focuses on five categories of engagement. One of the five categories specifically related to students' perspective of how often they interact with professors and administrators inside and outside of the classroom. Pike et al. (2008) distinguished three separate categories: on campus 20 hours or less, off-campus 20 hours or less, on- or off-campus more than 20 hours.



Students in each category had a positive significant correlation with student-faculty interaction overall score – a measure of frequency for how often students interacted with faculty (Pike et al., 2008).

Conversely, other perspectives exist that contradict the notion that working students engage more outside of class with their peers and faculty about coursework. Although working had a positive correlation student-faculty interaction category, a slight contradiction was present in Pike et al.'s (2008) study. Students who worked 20 hours or less off-campus and more than 20 hours on- or off-campus had negative correlation scores for the supportive campus environment category which measured students' perception of institutional commitment to student success and the quality of students' interactions with peers, faculty, and administration (Pike et al., 2008). One conclusion could be that the interactions working students have with other students negates any perceived benefits recognized by faculty interactions. However, another conclusion could be that students are having interactions with faculty, but their needs are not being met and they are feeling unsupported.

Further corroborating this potential paradox were findings by Lundberg (2004) in which working more than 20 hours a week was negatively correlated with a faculty interaction composite variable in which students responded the frequency of their interactions with faculty in areas ranging from talking with an instructor about the course, talking with faculty about personal concerns, or meeting with faculty to discuss an extracurricular club. Although these items were scored by a Likert scale measuring frequency, the items that make up the variable suggest elements of quality as well as quantity of faculty interactions. It is unlikely that a student would discuss personal concerns or ask for advice from a professor if they had not had quality interactions with the faculty member previously. Kuh (2003) best articulated the importance of

these studies by stating that meaningful frequent contact by faculty with students was correlated with higher levels of student learning. This literature suggests that working students may have the necessary frequency of interactions with faculty but may be missing out on further learning opportunities due to a lack of substantive interactions.

### **Persistence**

Research on the persistence of working students is comparable to the previous section in that there is not a clear consensus in the literature about the impact work has on students' persistence. The literature is inconsistent in that some researchers believe work leads to greater levels of persistence while others believe that work inhibits students' ability to stay enrolled in college, even further others postulate that it simply depends on the number of hours worked, employment type, or students' role orientation.

Kulm and Cramer (2006) found evidence in their institution specific study of over 500 students to support the notion that a direct positive relationship exists between students' persistence and the number of hours they worked. Persistence was calculated by grouping students' responses on three items: "(1) employment interfered with progress toward a degree or graduation date, (2) employment extended the amount of time to complete degree, and (3) employment decreased my priority to graduate on time" (p. 932). Contrary to the studies previously mentioned on academics, the researchers did not discuss the possibility of any potential curvilinear relationship between work and persistence.

Offering a differing perspective, two studies conducted by Bozick (2007) and Lohfink and Pualsen (2005), used data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study cohort that collected data from participants in 1996 and 2001. Using this data, both researchers found similar results in that generally, the number of hours worked was not significantly

correlated with persistence. This finding is congruent with data from over two decades ago where Fjortoft (1995) also found that student employment did not have an impact on persistence. King and Bannon (2002) shared a similar perspective when evaluating the persistence rates of students who worked less than 15 hours and those who didn't work at all.

Boznick's (2007) analysis of the data lead to a finding not identified by Lohfink and Pualsen (2005) in which a negative correlation existed for persistence when students worked more than 20 hours a week. These students were found to be 54% less likely to persist than individuals in the study who worked lower levels of intensity. This finding is congruent with other research conducted that postulates it isn't possible to look at students' employment broadly and make accurate conclusions about persistence. Rather, there are other key factors that need to be taken into consideration about the student and their work in order to determine more precise conclusions about persistence.

Boznick (2007) identified one of the factors that must be evaluated, the number of hours worked. According to Perna, Cooper, and Li (2006), an appropriate amount of work is correlated with higher retention rates. Their research study identified higher persistence rates for students who work between 1-15 hours per week than for students who do not work and for those who work more than 15 hours per week. A report from the Department of Education analyzed by King (2002) also highlights the varying impact of different hours worked has on persistence. King identified that working 35 hours or more per week had a deleterious effect on retention numbers with 21% of students in this category leaving the university within one year of starting. This is a stark contrast to the 6% of students who did not persist that were working less than 15 hours per week. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (2005) best explained the possible correlation between persistence and employment in that the relationship was likely U-

shaped, with there being gains in persistence up to a certain number of hours before its effects became deleterious on the student's possibility of being retained.

Another component that is an important factor in working students' persistence is the type of employment they are in. Although only conducted with a small sample at one institution, researchers found students who worked off campus to have greater levels of resiliency than students who had only on-campus study jobs including students in work-study and non-work positions (Martinez, Bilges, Shabazz, Miller, and Morote, 2012). Students with higher levels of resiliency are more likely to be able to solve problems when challenging situations arise, a skill necessary in order to persist in a university setting.

The final factor noted in the literature about students' employment and persistence is the role orientation students have to their multiple priorities in life. Mamiseishvili (2010) conducted a study using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study's finding that students' were 2.74 times more likely to persist when viewing themselves as students first then employees rather than employee then student. When controlling for students' first-year grade point average, race, and living arrangement (on or off-campus), role orientation was the most significant factor in the model for determining persistence from the students' first to second year. Mamiseishvili (2010) found role orientation to be even more significant than the number of hours students worked. Role orientation's importance has been documented previously by Warren (2002) in his model which suggests that role orientation is not the sole determinant but just one of several factors that impacts students' success.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

One of the long held beliefs of higher education professionals about students in college is the notion that on campus involvement in organizations and activities is one of the key

ingredients to success and educational attainment (Astin, 1985). This theory postulates that students learn by becoming involved and recognizes that students' time is limited and therefore educators are competing with other commitments in students' lives (Astin, 1985). Although this involvement theory still has merit in some areas, it fails to apply to the realities of many of today's students who are forced to work a considerable number of hours and are therefore unable to get as involved as they would like.

Cheng and Alcantara (2004) found this to be true in their mixed methods study. Participants in focus groups shared if they didn't have to work, among multiple things, they would participate at higher rates in clubs and student organizations (Cheng & Alcantara, 2004). Further explanation of the difficulties working students have in getting involved on campus is due to time spent at work. Coates (2013) identified trends spent on campus for working and non-working students. Under the ordinal time range of 11-15 hours, working students spent more time on campus than students who didn't work. However above that threshold, students spent less time on campus (Coates, 2013). Similar results were found by Bradley (2006) in that students spent less time on campus outside of class when they worked.

A possible implication of spending less time on campus is less opportunity to get involved with organizations or activities. Significant negative correlations have been found to exist between campus involvement and employment (Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Humphrey, 2006). One study using institutional specific data collected through NSSE contested this finding however, stating that there were minimal differences in involvement in co-curricular activities between employed and non-employed students (Lang, 2012).

## **Social Interactions**

One area of students' lives that is impacted by work is the amount of time they spend socializing. Several studies have found mostly consistent findings, demonstrating that a negative correlation exists for students between hours worked and hours spent with friends (Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Lang, 2012; Robotham, 2012; Robotham, 2009). Lang best described the cause for the decrease in social time when stating partial support for the time-trade off perspective identified by Baum (2005) which states that with a finite number of hours a day available, as students work they must decrease time spent in other areas of their life. Kulm and Cramer (2006) discovered that not only do working students socialize less, they also view socializing as less important.

Cheng and Alcantara (2004) provided the only counter to what was previously described. No significant difference was found between working and non-working students' social experiences through the quantitative component of their study. The items that were a part of this combined variable do not appear to be most representative of time spent socializing however, as they include items such as I have a group of friends who share interests and values, or the experience in residence halls has been a positive one. The results from the qualitative components of their study are much more in line with the previously discussed negative effect of work on social time. Participants identified free time and time spent socializing with friends as some of the highest costs of having employment. As a whole, this literature suggests that students who work are willing to give up time socializing in order to earn money.

## **Skill Development**

One impact of employment on students that is not nearly as contested in the literature is the notion of students developing skills and knowledge on the job which contributes to greater

success on campus and in their place of employment following graduation. One of the studies that most clearly defines this benefit is in Kramer & Usher's (2011) study exploring the extent of students' career-readiness and work integrated learning. Their findings showed a majority of students in various types of work agreed that their critical thinking, analytical, problem solving, and decision making skills were improved due to the experiences they had on the job. Kramer & Usher (2011) also discovered that a majority of students believed their work experience provided them with a better appreciation of content learned in their academic studies. This finding was most pronounced for students in internships and research assistants with 89% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Not only did work provide a greater appreciation of academic content for these students, it also improved knowledge and technical skills in areas related to students' field of study (Internships – 88%, Research Assistant – 91% agree or strongly agree) (Kramer & Usher, 2011, p.17).

Although not to the same extent found by Kramer & Usher (2011), a study conducted by Robotham (2012) also found that students said work provided an opportunity to relate more to the concepts and theories learned in their academic coursework. These students also reported development in skill areas that would help them succeed in the workplace environment after graduation and improve their employability (Coates, 2013). Several authors have reported skill development for employed students in a variety of areas. Although the extent differs per study, the areas in which working students improved have been documented to include: time management skills (Curtis, 2007; Chang & Alcantra, 2004; Curtis & Shani, 2002), interpersonal skills (Robotham, 2012; Curtis, 2007, Curtis & Shani, 2002), self-confidence (Robotham, 2012; Curtis, 2007; Curtis & Shani, 2002), communication skills (Robotham, 2012; Curtis & Shani, 2002), critical thinking skills (Kramer & Usher, 2011), problem solving skills (Kramer & Usher,

2011), decision making skills (Kramer & Usher, 2011), organizational skills (Hammes & Haller, 1983) and goal setting (Coates, 2013), and understanding of business issues (Curtis, 2007).

### **Well-Being**

The impact employment has on college students' physical and mental well-being is important to consider. Regarding well-being, the literature contains varying results about the direct impact employment has on health factors. Results from a survey of 750 students were analyzed by Carney, McNeish, & McColl (2005) in which they found students who worked part time and those in debt had higher stress levels than those who didn't work or have debt. Strongly related to stress level is the amount of sleep one receives. As mentioned previously, data suggested that since time is finite, as students worked they had to give something up out of their schedule. For many students, sleep seems to be their choice. Robotham (2009; 2012) conducted two surveys in different years in which 53% and 31% respectively of working students stated "they felt so tired they couldn't concentrate". (p. 327, 71).

In addition to a lack of sleep, students also reported higher stress due to their employment. In the same two studies Robotham (2009; 2012) found that 54% and 31% of respondents stated that employment increased their stress levels. Worse yet, 39% and 28% of students identified that working reduced their ability to handle the stress that came their way. A positive however, is that 33% and 28% of the sample surveyed said combining work and academics increased their ability to handle stress (Robotham, 2009, p. 328; 2012, p. 72). Bradley (2006) and Holmes (2008) found comparable results in their studies where hours worked was positively correlated with stress. Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diekhoff (2013) similarly found that working students displayed greater levels of anxiety and disclosed higher levels of stress.



Furthermore, they studied the mental health of students, but did not identify any significant difference in depression between students who worked and those who did not.

Other researchers offered differing perspectives regarding working students' stress levels. Curtis (2007) found that stress levels did not vary across three categories of students: those working now, those who used to work, and those who never worked. Approximately half of the students in the study reported being stressed, which was consistent across the groups (Curtis, 2007). Another finding on working students' well-being was discussed by Cheng and Alcantara (2004) in which they discovered that students working over 20 hours a week reported higher levels of happiness than those who worked less hours. They were able to find out the reason for this through discussions with participants in focus groups. Students who worked over 20 hours a week were able to find work more meaningful and considered it a significant part of their college experience. Although it is not consistent with all of the studies, overall, the evidence seems to suggest that students who work have lower levels of well-being.

## **Conclusion**

Over the years, higher education professionals have been interested in the impact work has on students' success. Although there are some developmental benefits students recognize when working, generally the literature states that work has a detrimental impact on students' success. The vast majority of this research has been conducted quantitatively however, which limits the depth of knowledge researchers can gain about students' employment experiences. By seeking to understand how working students describe their academic and employment experiences and the connections that exist between these areas, educators will have a greater knowledge base to inform practices that are needed to support these working students. Although historically student affairs professionals have encouraged students to limit the amount of time spent working, as the

cost of higher education continues to rise, an even greater portion of students will be working at higher rates in order to afford a degree. This study helps fill the gap in the literature by providing detail rich stories of four working students and their experiences as they navigate their multiple roles of student and employee.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this collective case study was to describe the nexus between academic and employment experiences of undergraduate students at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwestern United States. Historically, higher education professionals have viewed work as simply a means to afford the education received in the classroom. Although this is the current reality, research indicates there is a significant possibility for enhanced learning by integrating what is learned in the classroom with the work that is done in places of employment (Salisbury, Padgett, and Pascarella, 2009). As a researcher, I was interested in learning how working students described their academic and employment experiences and the resulting positive and negative benefits of the nexus that existed.

#### **Research Design**

The method used when conducting this study was qualitative research. Qualitative research is used to provide a deep understanding and description of a specific incident (Mertens, 2015). Qualitative research is used to acquire findings at a deeper and more descriptive level. It is used when trying to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This design was beneficial for my topic of exploring how working students connect their employment and academic experiences due to its ability to allow for participants to share rich descriptions, and it provided me the opportunity to ask the participants additional follow-up questions spurring deeper thinking about their experiences.

Within the qualitative design there are multiple paradigms a researcher can employ when conducting research. A researcher's paradigm is the manner in which the researcher views the

world and the research that is being conducted (Mertens, 2015). Understanding which paradigm the researcher used is beneficial to understand how they viewed their interactions with the participants and how they analyzed the data that were collected. When conducting this research, I used a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm views reality as one that is socially constructed (Mertens, 2015). Reality is dependent upon an individual's worldview and no individual will have the exact worldview as another (Patton, 2002). Collecting the research with a constructivist paradigm was important due to my recognition that the participants' views on the nexus of their academic and employment experiences was dependent upon their current life situation and previous life experiences.

When conducting research in the constructivist paradigm, all meanings of findings are influenced by the interpretations and worldviews of those involved in the data collection and data analysis. With these basic assumptions, researchers must attempt to view the lived experiences of the participants through the participants' perspectives, rather than their own (Mertens, 2015). When interviewing participants and analyzing the data, I sought to leave my own lived experiences behind and instead share the perspective of the participant.

**Rationale for Collective Case Study Methodology.** The specific methodology I chose for this research was a collective case study design. Case study research explores one or more bounded systems over time through intensive data collection of multiple sources of information to create a description of the case and case themes (Creswell, 2013). In a collective case study approach, there is one overarching phenomenon or program selected, but the researcher uses multiple cases to describe the issue (Creswell, 2013). The case study design calls for a specific case or issue to be identified with distinct boundaries around the case which is being examined (Creswell, 2013). A case in itself is a noun, even when studying a phenomenon, the case that is

studied is an entity (Stake, 2006). For this study, the specific issue being examined is the integration of course content with off campus employment experiences for full time students working on average 20 or more hours a week.

The collection of the cases, called a quintain by Stake (2006), is the primary focus of this type of study. The collective case study design differs from the single case study in that the researcher focuses a greater amount of attention on the quintain, rather than the case. This study seeks to present an accurate picture of the nexus between academic and employment experiences for students working a considerable number of hours.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

A component of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection. The centrality of the researcher in data collection is a benefit because the researcher is able to fully understand what the participant is conveying. The researcher has direct access to the participant's verbal and nonverbal communication cues which can provide insight to the researcher at greater depth and breadth than through a quantitative instrument. Having the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection does however present some shortcomings in the form of researcher bias or subjectivity (Merriam, 2009). A method for confronting this challenge is for researchers to identify their biases, experiences, or worldviews that may shape the way the data is collected and analyzed (Merriam, 2009).

The inspiration for this research came while meeting with students for resume reviews in my role as a graduate assistant. One semester I met with several students who only had one or two work experiences listed on their resume. As I do with almost all students I meet with, I asked them if they were involved in anything on campus and if not, had they considered it. Each of these students told me they had wanted to get involved but were unable to because of work

commitments. This stemmed from their financial need to attend the university. These students shared with me that they were working 20 or 30 hours a week off campus, which after studying, left little time to be involved on campus. Upon learning about these students' situations, I immediately recognized the privilege I had as a student who worked around 10 hours a week. Initially, I thought about how different their experience at the university was from mine because my involvement on campus was such a salient part of my development.

Following these conversations with students, I spoke with colleagues about working students and many of them could think of conversations they had with students about work being a drawback to their university experience. Upon having conversations about these students' experiences at the university, I was motivated to research the topic further. At my first glance of the literature, I found many articles to be in line with the initial thoughts I had that working many hours a week was detrimental to students' experience at the university.

While I was reading various articles, I came across one about leadership development in first-year working students (Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett, & Blaich, 2012). The authors of this article argued that the students in the study who worked more than 20 hours a week had greater gains in leadership development than all other students. The authors also encouraged readers to be open to considering the wealth of experience and information working students bring into the classroom. Although it was different than my original perspective, I was able to recognize the authors' points and wanted to learn more. I found there to be very few studies written about the overlap of employment and academics for working students, and I wanted to create a platform for these students to share their stories. The questions I had about working students' experiences in the classroom and at work led me to create research questions that explored how students describe their differing roles.

When conducting this research, it was important for me to consider how my identities and experiences shaped the data collection and data analysis processes. As a college student, I worked an on campus job for less than ten hours a week. Admittedly, I never thought about whether or not there was any overlap between the experience I gained at work and the concepts I was learning in class.

### **Research Setting**

The setting for this study was Midwestern University, a large land-grant university in the Midwest region of the United States. According to the university's fact book, the university's total enrollment was approximately 24,500 students with approximately 19,500 of those identified as undergraduate students. The university is in a mid-sized city with the campus located in an urban setting. The location of the university provided participants with employment opportunities located close to campus. According to a survey conducted by the university, 46% of respondents worked off campus and 36% worked on campus. Of the total students who worked, over 20% work more than 20 hours a week. These statistics demonstrate that there is a large portion of the students on this campus who work.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with the 2015 guidelines for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Appendix A). No known risks were present for participants by participating in the study. The informed consent document that all participants signed outlined all expectations for their participation in the study (Appendix B). The external transcriptionist had completed the CITI Limited Research Worker training and signed a transcriptionist confidentiality statement.

Confidentiality was upheld through the use of pseudonyms for participants. No identifying information that could be traced back to individual participants was used throughout this document nor will be used in any future publications of these findings. All audio recordings were maintained electronically and were only accessible through a password protected device. All research consent forms and transcription data were stored in the researcher's desk at his locked apartment. Following the conclusion of the study, records directly connected to student identity will be destroyed or deleted. The list of names that correspond to the student actual names will be also be destroyed following the study.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The sample for this study was chosen through purposeful criterion-based sampling. Using this sampling technique, a researcher reviews and studies cases that meet predetermined criteria to ensure consistency within the cases (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling provides the researcher the ability to select cases that show different perspectives on a particular issue. (Creswell, 2013). A recruitment letter was sent out by my thesis advisor via email to all individuals on the university's Career Services staff listerv and all advisors on the university's academic advising listerv (Appendix C) asking them to notify students who might meet the following criteria (1) be an undergraduate student enrolled full-time, (2) be at least 19 years of age, (3) must have completed 27 credit hours or more, and (4) must work at least twenty hours a week during the school year. When choosing participants, the researcher looked for individuals that met the basic criteria and that would provide diverse experiences regarding the topic.

The email addresses of individuals meeting the requirements were sent to me by the advisors and coaches. Upon receipt of interested students, I followed up with an email to the student explaining the scope of the study and requesting the individuals to provide me with their



current place of employment, average number of hours worked during the semester, number of academic credits completed, and academic major (Appendix D). This additional information provided me a chance to select participants with diverse experiences to maximize the cross-case analysis component of this design (Stake,2006).

### **Case Selection**

The central focus of a multiple case study is the phenomenon that is being studied in multiple cases. The phenomenon being studied is the nexus of academic and employment experiences for full-time undergraduate students working 20 hours or more. Given the importance of the phenomenon in this research design, the selection of cases is crucial to understanding more about the phenomenon (Creswell,2013). According to Stake (2006, p. 23) there are three main criteria for selecting cases: “(a) Is the case relevant to the quintain? (b) Do the cases provide diversity across contexts, and (c) Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts.”

The number of cases recommended for selection in multiple case study research ranges from no more than four to up to ten cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006). Creswell (2013) recommends less than four cases in a collective case study to assure that thick descriptions are provided for each case. Stake (2006) advises selecting between four and ten cases for collective case studies and recommends the selection of cases that provide similar and contrasting aspects within the quintain. Less than four does not provide enough opportunity for cross-case analysis but greater than ten diminishes the cross-case analysis because there simply would be too great a volume of contrasting instances.

Following the recruitment time period, I reached out to specific individuals inviting them to participate in the study. To gain both depth and breadth of participants’ experiences, four

cases were selected for this study. This number of cases allowed for the researcher to gain multiple perspectives of the case while also allowing a deep overall analysis. The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability but rather a deep understanding, and this number of participants allowed the researcher to gain multiple sources of information creating a more in-depth study (Creswell, 2013).

Participants were given the opportunity during the interview to describe themselves and their salient social identities including age, sex, and race. Participants' credit hours and majors were collected prior to interviews during case selection. In addition to the participants' demographics it was equally important to document the participants' employment experiences. This information can all be found in Table 1.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Credit Hours Completed	Major	Hours Worked Per Week	Employment Category
Kayla	19	Female	White	43	Accounting, Finance	25-30	Banking
Peyton	19	Female	White	77	Marketing	27-30	Design/Public Relations
Alyssa	21	Female	White	75	Economics	20	Non-profit
Joe	22	Male	White	101	Pre-Law/Political Science	45	Apartment Leasing

*Table 1. Participant Demographic Information*

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Two interviews were conducted per participant. Multiple sources of data were used to paint a clearer picture of the cases being studied. Data were collected using methods including: (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) photographs taken by participants, and (c) participants' current and

previous semesters' course schedules, and (d) participant's typical weekly schedule including work, classes, and other planned activities.

**Interviews.** The participants were contacted by email to schedule a time for a semi-structured interview. Interviews lasted between 45 to 85 minutes in length and took place in a private study room in the on-campus library. I informed the participants of the purpose of the study and allowed participants to choose a pseudonym. I asked each participant to sign a research consent form which explained the study and contained my contact information. All interview sessions were recorded using two digital recorders, one primary and one backup, in case the primary recorder failed. I also used an interview protocol guide (Appendix E) to ensure consistency of the questions asked for each interview. Follow-up questions were used in instances where the participant wanted to elaborate on a topic or idea further. Field notes were taken by the researcher during the interview to identify non-verbal cues and after the interview to record additional observations.

**Documents.** The second type of evidence collected was documents. The documents that were analyzed included the participants' college course schedule, typical weekly schedule, and digital photographs that represented their identity as a student and employee. Participants were notified at the time of selection that I would be collecting these documents. I asked participants to provide me with a copy of their current and previous semester's class schedules either through email or at the first interview. These two measures provided a deeper of understanding of what it meant to be a successful college student for each individual participant. The class schedules were used to understand what being a student looked like for each participant. The photographs were used as a discussion point during the second interview to talk in greater detail about the nexus that existed between their academic and employment experiences. Asking participants to

take photos provided a chance for deeper reflection on the idea of the intersectionality of their roles as students and employees.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step of data analysis was organizing the data (Creswell, 2013). Following each interview, the data were transcribed verbatim by an outside transcriptionist into a word processing document for ease of access to the specific phrases and stories the participants shared. Following completion of all interviews and transcribing, I reread the transcriptions while replaying the audio recording to ensure content accuracy and to refamiliarize myself with the entirety of what the participants had said. While reviewing the content of the interviews, I wrote notes of key concepts or statements that stuck out to me on a blank sheet of paper (Creswell, 2013). I also wrote down the line number of the participants' statements to have for reference if I needed to go back and review a particular statement. The goal of data analysis in qualitative research is to understand the data through "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said" (Creswell, 2013, pp.175-176). In order to most effectively consolidate information, I created themes through data coding and entered them into a spreadsheet for ease of use. I followed an open coding process which instructed me to be open to anything that might be useful when coding, allowing themes to naturally emerge (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then grouped together to form broad categories. Categories are "conceptual elements that cover or span many individual examples" (Merriam, 2009, p. 181). Once the data were consolidated to a smaller number of categories, I added specific statements from the participants into the spreadsheet. Each quote placed into a category included the pseudonym of the participant and the identifying line number from the original transcript.

After completing the process of coding, I developed themes for each individual case. Following the creation of themes for the single cases, I began the process of cross-case analysis. During this process I looked for similarities and differences between the four cases. While reviewing each case during I searched for themes that contributed to my understanding of the quintain. Convergent and divergent themes emerged during the process of cross-case analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative research provides researchers the benefit of working closely with the data. Using a constructivist paradigm I served as the primary instrument of data collection shaping what data were collected by the questions I asked and in the manner I asked them. It is beneficial therefore to use strategies to increase the credibility of my findings through several methods.

The first way I ensured credibility was through member checking. Merriam (2009) described the importance of member checks stating that they are a crucial element to ensuring that the interpreted meaning of what participants said was accurate. The participants of this study were given the opportunity to review their respective section documented in the findings of Chapter 4. This step was taken so the participants could provide me with feedback if changes or clarifications were necessary. Three of the four participants participated in the member checks. The fourth did not provide any edits, clarifications, or feedback that everything was correct.

A second method I utilized for credibility was the use of peer editors. Two individuals were chosen for this process. The first peer editor was a personal mentor from my undergraduate university. This individual was chosen due to his expertise in qualitative research, having previously completed a qualitative dissertation while earning a Ph.D. The second peer reviewer was a first-year master's student pursuing a degree in Educational Administration with a

specialization in Student Affairs. This individual was chosen due to her growing familiarity with research.

Lastly, using a collective case study design it was important to have multiple sources of data. The use document analysis of the participant photos and their weekly and class schedules increased reliability of the findings. These documents were used to support the initial interpretations I made based off what participants described in their interviews.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the methods and procedures used to conduct the study. A constructivist approach was used during the entirety of the process during the creation of this qualitative collective case study. Criterion-based sampling was used to select four participants for two interviews and document collection. All interviews were conducted in person lasting from 45 to 85 minutes in length. Documents included digital photographs of students' own take on their connection between academics and employment, a typical weekly schedule, and a list of courses they were enrolled in this semester and last. These documents were collected either via email or in person during the second interview.

The data analysis section described the procedures I took during the coding of the data process and in the development of individual and cross-case themes. The steps the researcher took to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data were also described in this chapter. In Chapter 4, the findings identified through data analysis are presented.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Case 1: Kayla

**Participant Characteristics.** Kayla described herself as a very driven individual and someone who did not like to waste time. She explained saying “I just feel like I have accomplished something when I am not wasting time.” This ideology was evident throughout our conversations as she described the many facets of her life. Even at the age of 19, she demonstrated her drive by achieving the position of customer service representative at her place of employment, a step above an entry-level teller position. While working 25-30 hours a week at her place of employment, she was also dual-majoring in accounting and finance, taking 13 credit hours. In addition to working and taking classes, Kayla spent time each week being involved with two on-campus organizations, serving as an officer in one. Kayla explained that she always had something she could be doing whether it was homework, work, or something for one of the organizations in which she participated. Kayla’s drive to accomplish so much was best described when she mentioned why she works so hard. She stated,

You know, I think that I have my life to relax. As long as I can push myself harder now I should. I mean, it is kind of like a rubber band you can see how far you can pull it.

Although Kayla admittedly explained that sometimes she stretches herself too thin and like a rubber band she snaps, she thought that dealing with a breakdown here and there was worth it in order to do all of the things she did. However, she did admit that sometimes it is difficult to persist due to how stressful managing everything was. Specifically she stated,

If I can make it past this semester than I will probably be able to finish my college career because this is by far the most stressful semester that I have faced and a lot of people

have been facing. I know that one of my friends just last week had to drop out because she just couldn't take it... That is not even the first of my friends, like a few friends have dropped out because it is a lot of stress. I mean I thought about taking a year off next year just due to this one semester. I'm not going to, but I understand where they are coming from.

The underlying motivation Kayla used to push herself through the stress was her future. Since her sophomore year of high school, Kayla knew her dream was to work for the Peace Corp. She had a clear vision of her future and knew that she wanted to eventually work as a community developer in another country. Kayla recognized what it would take to accomplish this goal and knew full well that she would need to eventually obtain a master's degree. Kayla was committed to exuding a substantial amount of effort if it meant accomplishing her goal.

Consistent with her goal to help others in a position with the Peace Corp, Kayla did not miss an opportunity to help others here at Midwestern University. She coordinated community service opportunities through her officer role in a student organization and often served as an informal tutor for classmates who were struggling. Kayla was giving a lot - not just of her time, but also of her money. She described taking friends out for dinner sometimes because she knew she could afford it and they could not. Further, the individual Kayla was in a relationship with was trying to come back to college but was unable to due to an outstanding loan. Kayla paid approximately \$1,000 to cover the loan, trusting that the individual would pay her back. All of these actions combined demonstrate Kayla's characteristic of being highly motivated to help others throughout her life.



As mentioned above, Kayla's employment provided financial compensation that she could use to help other people. The primary reason for Kayla's employment however was to afford her education at Midwestern University. She explained her financial position sharing,

I mean I was just hoping for a little bit (scholarship money) and nothing. That frustrated me. I had to take out loans and whatever my loans, my loans don't even cover it all because my parents don't qualify for the parent loans or anything like that so I am on my own pretty much so whatever my loans don't cover I pay out of pocket.

Although her parents were able to help her cover part of her living expenses in the residence halls, she still anticipated that she would leave college with \$40,000 - \$45,000 of debt.

**Academic Experiences.** Kayla viewed herself as an individual who greatly enjoyed learning. However, at the time we spoke, Kayla was not finding fulfillment in her classes. She even stated, "I'm enjoying work more than I am enjoying school." A major reason for Kayla's less than positive sentiment about her academic experience was due to her frustration with the small amount she believes she is learning from her coursework.

Kayla took business classes in high school which led her to feel like her current college classes were redundant with those she has completed previously. Further, she believed that a lot of the information taught in class is "pretty common sense unless you get down to like some formulas you haven't heard of." Simply put, Kayla believed that the classes were sometimes a waste of her time.

With this being said, she had also recognized that the rigor of her courses had increased as she began taking more major specific classes. Regarding the intensity of her coursework Kayla shared: "Each of my classes goes through like at least 2 chapters a week and if you have 4 main courses, that is 8 chapters a week plus homework." Kayla explained she had many

homework assignments each week, between 20 and 25, matching the large amount of content covered each week. She described the effect this has on her learning by saying,

I don't mind doing homework when I have the time to do, but when I have like 25 assignments in one week that is a lot. So I don't actually get to problem solve or enjoy doing my homework, I just like have to get it done and move on the next one. I don't learn anything.

The approach Kayla uses to complete the homework assignments is not one that allows for the maximum amount of learning to take place. Kayla informed me of a method useful in saving time for online homework for one class. Kayla explained,

I can click it and you submit it and it shows all the ones that are incorrect and you can go back and click through it see the right answers and if you click try another version it freezes, you can exit out of it, go back and it keeps the right answers and you can resubmit it. That is how I have been getting through six weeks of homework.

While this method for accomplishing her homework might not be the most effective for learning, it is the most time efficient. Kayla described herself as a hands-on learner first and foremost, however, with only a limited amount of time, she did not have the chance to work through things to acquire a full understanding of the content.

While discussing how prepared she felt for her classes each week, Kayla admitted that most often she showed up unprepared. Although Kayla had been trying to consistently read and take notes prior to entering her classes, she believed that she did not learn as effectively that way. She said instead, she learns best in stressful situations where she is unprepared. The impact this has on her level of participation in class discussions was not notable because she stated "if it is a

class that I'm not interested in, then I probably don't participate in it at all because I am probably upset that I am in that class."

Kayla's frustration with some of her classes did not just impact her participation in class, but also her attendance. If given the opportunity to miss class she was more likely to do so. As she explained for one particular class, "I have been to class like 3 times because attendance is optional and they post the lectures." Although traditional insight would suggest going to class is important, Kayla did not think it made much of a difference. She described another student who scored lower than herself on an exam who went to class every day, studied, and did all of the homework. Although she confessed she was not doing great in that course, it seemed as though she justified not going to class by the fact that she was more successful than students who did attend class.

Although Kayla explained that her lack of interest in her coursework was due to the fact that it was redundant, another reason was also discussed. When asked what portion of her professors were aware of her work experience, she very quickly and adamantly responded, "They don't care." This belief was reiterated several times when asked different things about her perceptions or interactions with her professors. Two specific examples she mentioned is that her professors did not do things like ask about what an average week is like, or acknowledge the class average on an exam is 50%. She said that all of her professors told students to treat their classes like a full-time job, which was frustrating to Kayla because they do not realize that most students are taking 5 or 6 classes and working part-time. Kayla's frustration was in that it is not possible to have 5 full-time jobs in the form of coursework and be employed in an actual part-time job. A disconnect was strongly felt between Kayla and most of her professors. As she discussed, "it is kind of the same thing when you are a teenager and you and your parents don't

agree because they have kind of forgotten what it has been like to be a teenager.” Kayla believed her professors did not recognize the challenges and stress of being a student.

The displeasure Kayla had with her professors led to negative consequences. Since Kayla believed that her professors did not care about their students, she was uninterested in attending office hours if she needed help. She stated her views on office hours saying, “I will go to an office hour if I feel like the professor is a reasonable person.” Throughout her time at Midwestern University, Kayla had only once attended office hours. The class she was enrolled in was very challenging, but she liked the professor and that made the difference for her to go and ask for further assistance. When asked what difference it would make if all her professors cared about students, Kayla mentioned professors might be more lenient and more likely to curve tests.

Overall, the amount of frustration Kayla shared with me about her academics increased significantly during our second interview. Her level of frustration was correlated with a decrease in academic success. The semester prior to our conversations, Kayla had earned all A’s. By our second interview, she shared that she was likely to earn B’s and C’s, due to the coursework and her dislike of it. Kayla informed me in our second interview that her unhappiness with her current classes has led her to begin making plans to switch her major. She said she felt limited with her accounting and finance dual major and had plans to switch to Business Administration where she could choose at least three areas of emphasis.

**Employment Experiences.** Kayla was employed at a bank in the city where Midwestern University was located. Like many students, Kayla worked primarily due to financial reasons. As she explained “college isn’t free and I have to work” and “you are only there for the job and that you will try to do the best of your abilities but you are really there beings that you have to pay

for school.” Although Kayla asserted school was her first priority, work was not far behind on the list of time and energy expended during an average week.

Although Kayla had decreased the number of hours she worked during the semester we talked to 25 a week, the semester prior she worked approximately 35 hours a week. In order to acquire that many hours, Kayla often found herself working seven days a week. She typically was scheduled to work three or four hours on four days of the work week (Monday-Friday), eight hours on Saturday, and four hours on Sunday. During her one scheduled day off a week however, she usually picked up hours at another branch.

When we spoke, Kayla had just had her one year anniversary working with the company and held the position of customer service representative. This role was above an entry level position due to the inclusion of some elements of management. When asked what her job entails Kayla shared:

If there is not a manager or an assistant manager around to go to we kind of train the tellers and help them kind of ease into their position. We also do teller work if there is no one that needs accounts [opened] or if there is nothing serious going on, then we are in that teller mode.

Additionally, Kayla described that she was going to be in charge of managing the transitions for two new employees to her branch.

Being an employee at this financial institution provided Kayla with many opportunities for growth. Not only did she gain valuable management experience as previously described, she also gained experience in financial services, sales, and working as a part of a team. Further, Kayla explained her work experience provided her with the skills of schedule planning, handling

stressful situations, communication, thinking outside the box, and other beneficial life lessons such as having some savings set aside.

Although Kayla described the bank as stressful because of the high attention to detail necessary to not make a mistake, she explained that it still is a positive environment. If she or another individual makes a mistake, the bank is open to it, as long as they learn from the mistake and do not make it again. Although Kayla was in the process of beginning to switch to a new bank location, she felt very supported by her manager. When the bank was slow, her manager would allow her to work on homework which helped her balance her multiple commitments of work and school. Kayla explained that her manager understood that school should be her top priority. Even further, he knew what classes Kayla was enrolled in and would often discuss with her the concepts she was learning or things she was frustrated about. Although her manager did not finish college, Kayla described him as the best manager she has ever had because he was so supportive of her educational pursuits. Kayla discussed that he was more supportive than other managers she has had who did complete college.

**Extent of Academic and Employment Nexus.** An important concept explored by this study was the students' perception of connection or overlap between their academic and employment experiences. When asked about how Kayla views her dual roles of student and employee, she was quick to explain that she tries to keep her student life and employee life separate. Despite the fact that Kayla made an attempt to keep them separate, it was clear during our conversations that her identities as a student and as an employee were strongly interconnected.

As mentioned previously, Kayla planned on switching her major which led her to schedule an appointment with an academic advisor. She informed me that it was very

challenging to find a time that worked for her schedule and that she could not see her normal advisor because as she mentioned, “I’m either working from 2 to 6:30 or 12 to 5:30, so the same hours they are working so it is really hard.” Considering her time in class in addition to those working hours, very little time for other appointments is available.

Other instances also existed in which Kayla’s academic and employment identities converged. Kayla mentioned several times how she enjoyed working with people at work to help them develop their skills. Whether it was intentional or accidental, a relationship existed between what Kayla enjoyed doing at work and the major to which she was planning on switching. Additionally, when asked to think about her average day at work, she said that her experiences interacting with people overlapped with her coursework. Specifically she stated,

The courses I have taken in the College of Business all have some sort of like people aspect to it and I think I have really become more patient with them and learning how to kind of take a step back and take a look at the way they are thinking and adapt my way of thinking.

Another example of connection Kayla mentioned included the use of knowledge about debits and credits she learned in accounting to explain to customers principles about balancing their checkbooks. Experiences Kayla had at work were described by her as beneficial because she was able to pull from those situations at times when writing papers for her coursework. Kayla believed her work experiences taught her important information, but at times she believed her coursework overlapped too much to the point where it was redundant. Kayla was in favor of receiving credit for her work and thought she could have saved thousands of dollars by not taking a class in management, marketing, communication, and English.

Even though Kayla was an advocate for credit for work, she described some instances where there is not a direct connection between her classes and work. When explaining one such example regarding concepts learned in finance she stated, “We have systems and programs that are already in place that calculate it [CD redemption rates] for us...why do we need a person to calculate it when it is obvious the computer can do it for us.” Irrespective of the actual utility of the concepts and formulas learned in class, another example that disavows the positives of credit for work is an example in which Kayla discussed doing poorly on an exam, even though she completed activities related to the material at work. Regardless, Kayla’s perspective was that Midwestern University should place a greater emphasis on understanding what students do at their places of employment and consider giving credit to students because they deserve it.

The other type of connection that existed between Kayla’s academic and employment experiences was in the form of available time. When I brought up the notion that some higher education professionals believe working a considerable number of hours decreases a student’s ability to achieve academically, Kayla adamantly disagreed with that line of thinking. She explained that relationship did not exist but rather that it depended on how well students balance their schedules and how well they can motivate themselves. Later during our conversation however, she described the impact the time spent at work had on her academics by stating, “I just have to work. So I may not be able to get A's all the time, I might have to settle for some B's and C's.” This statement demonstrates that the time Kayla spent at work did make a difference in her academic success.

## **Case 2: Peyton**

**Participant Characteristics.** Peyton, a sophomore Marketing major with an emphasis in advertising and public relations, maintained a very busy schedule. She was enrolled in twelve



credit hours and worked two jobs, one on campus and one off campus for a total of 27-30 hours a week. Additionally, Peyton was involved in a student organization related to her major and in intramurals. Peyton's self-identified strong organization skills and a sense of urgency that helped her ensure everything got accomplished on a regular basis.

When asked to tell me a little bit about herself and any important identities, Peyton mentioned several things that provided a context for her experiences. Peyton described being from a small town approximately two hours away from Midwestern University. Additionally she told me about her parents and her two sisters.

Peyton believed the way she experienced being a student was different than her peers. Coming into college she had been chosen to be a part of a selective honors program within Midwestern University's College of Business. This program was set up in a cohort model and therefore Peyton took many of her classes with the same group of peers. Differing from her peers in the program only one of her parents was employed in a "professional" position rather than both. This difference led Peyton to believe that her peers did not feel as strong of a financial burden by attending college. Peyton was fortunate enough to have earned scholarships to Midwestern University. These however, paled in comparison to the full-ride scholarships the majority of students in her cohort received. While other students worked primarily to gain experience, Peyton worked to gain experience and compensation. She described it as having "just no other choice" as the compensation she earns is used for living expenses such as rent. She explained that she had already had to take out a large amount for loans, and without work, she would have to take out even more.

**Academic Experiences.** Peyton believed her experience of academics at Midwestern University was different than that of her peers. She recognized by the time she was a junior in

high school that marketing was what she wanted to her career to revolve around. The College of Business Administration at Midwestern University required all students to be enrolled in a general business curriculum prior to entering major specific classes. This gave students the advantage of knowing about a wide variety of business disciplines so that they could understand core components of companies they would work for after graduation. For many students, this also allowed for a time of exploration through the various business majors.

Peyton expressed difficulty in getting through some of these classes because it was challenging for her to get excited about something such as accounting or finance when she knew she was not going to use it in her career. As she stated for these classes her view was that “I just have to get through it.” These feelings were much different than those she had about her marketing courses as she described being excited for the time when she was able to take only classes within her major. For the marketing class she was enrolled in, she greatly enjoyed it and it was one of her favorite classes she had taken at Midwestern University.

Although Peyton did not ever specifically mention how her grades were overall, she did discuss that for one course she received high scores on homework assignments and quizzes but was then shocked when she earned a poor grade on her exam resulting in a C+ for her overall course grade. This was unacceptable to Peyton so she worked with the instructor to find a way to receive extra credit to bump up her grade to a B-. Through her explanation, it was clear that Peyton expected herself to earn good grades in the A and B range.

In order to accomplish these grades, Peyton relied on her organization skills. As she stated to me,

If I miss an actual homework deadline it is because I didn't even know we had it or something. I've learned the importance of reading syllabi and I base my life off of those and schedule and try to look ahead and make sure they are done.

She explained she prefers "short, little assignments that take like less than 30 minutes each, those I usually want to knock out right away." Peyton's skill of arranging was also noted in how she prepared for her classes. Although she admitted she probably didn't feel as ready for each class as some of her peers, she still stated she completed all of the readings for class about 75% of the time. Peyton shared that she had a system that worked for her, however when working in a group, she informed me that things were much more difficult because you had to plan around everyone else. Specifically she shared, "I think I spend more time trying to find time to meet with people than I actually do meeting with them. It is just hard with everyone's schedules." Working to find a time with a single group was challenging but Peyton, had a group for every class where she was expected to work outside of class for assignments.

Peyton's experiences with her professors were mixed. She had several teachers that made her excited about learning and yet others who did not. Peyton shared that she thought some of her teachers were incredibly intelligent but lacked knowledge about how to teach. She said she seems to be enrolled in one or two of those type of professors' courses each semester. One of the characteristics Peyton thought great teachers had a concern for caring about students' success. Peyton described the impact of her instructors demonstrating their care by stating, "I feel like I am more invited to like ask questions." Asking more questions whether in class or in office hours helped students communicate points they did not understand which led to higher levels of learning.

One example of a professor who Peyton believed cared about his students was her marketing professor. Peyton greatly enjoyed his class and mentioned that “a lot of it has to do with my professor.” This professor did several things to try and better understand his students. Peyton described one such action,

He sent out a thing at the beginning of the year, like a get to know you thing... on it he asked what we want to do and like list three of your dream jobs or places you want to work or something like that.

This professor also demonstrated care for students by using name tents to learn the students' names.

On the flip side, Peyton explained that some of her professors do not make any effort to show their care. One such example was an adjunct instructor who taught one of her graphic design courses. Peyton had a question about a quiz that was on the syllabus but was not showing up online. She followed the instructor's specific steps to email her through the course management system to make sure the email went through. The instructor posted an announcement but never responded directly to Peyton over a week's time period. This left Peyton unsure about whether or not her email actually went through and made her frustrated that the instructor could not send a simple response back to her.

Another way professors demonstrated care was their approach to office hours. Peyton often attended office hours for professors she thought cared because she viewed them as wanting to help her learn. She described one example of a positive experience she had when visiting office hours by saying,

She is a very want to get to know you person, so she always is like office hours, come to them, come to them... Like when I went today, today was for one question that would

have taken about 5 minutes to discuss but like she sat in there and said, how are you, how are your classes going and like you are this major right? Stuff like that.

Not all of Peyton's professors encouraged students to attend office hours as much as this professor. For another professor she said "it is more of like you are asking her for her office hours and like when she is available more than like she is don't forget my office hours are this, like so see me." The result of professors encouraging office hours for Peyton was that she felt they cared which led her to see them as more approachable.

**Employment Experiences.** Peyton held two jobs where combined she worked 27-30 hours per week on average. One position was an on-campus position that she worked 7-8 hours week doing a lot of receptionist type tasks such as answering the phone, handwriting mailings, and setting up displays. Peyton explained the main reason why she worked in this position was because she enjoyed the individuals she worked with and believed the connections she made from the position could help her future success. Additionally, as she described it, "I usually count on it as a time to get stuff done. Like if it is late at night I just usually think I can get it done at work." Having flexibility and a bit of extra time to get things done if they were slow was an added benefit Peyton recognized about her job there.

The other position Peyton held was with a marketing company in Midwestern University's city. This position was much more professional in nature and she worked around 20 hours per week there. In order to meet the expectations of amount worked, Peyton planned her schedule so that she could work all day on Tuesday's and Friday's at the company. Peyton's role with the company was to design materials for prospective clients and to complete personalized mailings to other companies about how the work of her company could help them be more

successful. She explained that there was constantly something to do and that she did not have time to do homework there.

Peyton enjoyed her on-campus job much more than her off-campus job. She described thinking of her off-campus job as something where she “get[s] up and go[es] oh, I have to go to work.” Part of the reason Peyton didn’t enjoy her off-campus job was due to its isolation. She rarely interacted with colleagues or her supervisor. She explained that her supervisor asked about her courses but only as small talk and wasn’t really aware of what she was learning in her courses.

Peyton did not acquire her position with this company until the end of the fall semester. Prior to the internship, she worked at the campus recreation center. She explained why she left the rec center by sharing,

There was nothing that made me want to leave there. I could do my homework when I was there and it was super easy and flexible but I got offered the internship and I was like I know I have to take that for the experience.

When asked about the advantages she has as a student who works, she explained that she has real work experience, stronger time management skills, and an increased number of professional connections.

**Extent of Academic and Employment Nexus.** The experience Peyton gained by working strongly correlated with the academic courses in which she was enrolled. Although she worked since week one of her first semester at college, Peyton had only recently begun to see the overlap with her academics and employment. Once she thought about it, there were numerous areas in which she recognized the connection between her academics and employment. In one example she mentioned,

In my Web and Graphic Design class we have learned about HTML, CSS, and coding. At [company name] I create trial sites. With my new knowledge about coding I can understand the “skeletons” behind the sites I create and how websites are constructed.

Peyton described another example of the connection going from school to work. She stated,

In [another] class we are learning a lot about Photoshop, InDesign, and Illustrator.

Conveniently, I utilize all three of these Adobe apps at [company name] as well. Learning in class has helped me to make better quality logos and at a faster rate.

These were just two of the examples we discussed. Peyton was able to see these connections in a multitude of course concepts, especially ones related to her major.

Although Peyton initially thought it wouldn't make a difference to her success if her professors knew about her work experience, she eventually decided it could. She originally thought that all of her professors expected that their students were working and therefore would not make any changes if they realized her experiences. When talking about one course where she has noticed a connection to her internship, she stated, “There is more that he could probably do, like does anyone here do this at their job, or something.” She claimed that if professors did that, then they would need to make sure they were not just trying to relate everything to one student. Peyton's management professor was able to find the balance of this when teaching about the difference in leadership and management. Her professor asked for examples from students work experiences about how they saw their managers and company leaders in this regard. This conversation led Peyton to think about her work environment. She described it sharing,

Before we started the reading about the differences between a leader and a manager I couldn't have told you the difference and then we talked more about it and now I kind of

see myself placing people in one of the categories by the way I know them and how they act toward me.

This point of connection created by her professor allowed Peyton to think more deeply about the concept and apply it to a real world situation in her life.

Beyond understanding content at a deeper level, when professors were able to facilitate connecting points for course content, Peyton recognized several additional benefits. When discussing utilizing the Adobe suite at work and then in class she stated, “That [work] has made it a little easier in actually class already having a little experience with that.” Additionally, Peyton described being more engaged and having increased confidence when recognizing an overlap in her academics and work. Regarding engagement, she described sharing her experiences in class and paid more attention in class when a connection existed.

Contrary to the positives listed above, a negative consequence existed from the connection between Peyton’s academics and work. Peyton responded affirmatively to the question of whether or not working makes college harder for her. The primary reason for this is that time spent at work leads to less opportunities to study and complete homework assignments. Explaining this idea, Peyton said, she is “very jealous” of how much time the non-working students have to study. She explained the difference it would make in her academics stating, “If I had all day on Tuesday’s and Friday’s [the days she works at her internship] to do homework life would be so easy.” Another concerning impact of Peyton’s work was her availability to attend office hours. The times most of Peyton’s professors had for office hours were while she was at work.



**Case 3: Alyssa**

**Participant Characteristics.** Alyssa described herself as the type of person who likes being busy. She explained, “I’m kind of a manic in that sense. I do better if I feel rushed.” Alyssa is also frustrated by laziness, stating that “Nothing pisses me off more than laziness or like not being motivated.” These views were a common thread throughout the entirety of our conversations.

Alyssa clearly lived a busy and non-lazy life as she was enrolled in 16 credit hours and worked approximately a combined 20 hours a week at three jobs. Alyssa was a first generation student at Midwestern University and was extremely motivated to be the first on either side of her family to earn a bachelor’s degree. Alyssa majored in economics with a minor in gerontology. Alyssa was interested in gerontology before attending Midwestern University, but once she started volunteering in a nursing home, she knew that was what she wanted to do for a career. She was interested in public policy and wanted to work for the federal government as a consultant on aging.

Until Alyssa reached that point in her future after graduation, she explained that she viewed school as her top priority. With this and her motivation, Alyssa explained that no matter what she had going on in her life, she did not expect exceptions to be made on her behalf. She described one professor who recognized that life sometimes happens and had a policy where students could turn in assignments late if they needed to. While enrolled in the class, Alyssa explained to me that she had surgery but yet she turned her assignment in on time that week.

Alyssa was incredibly successful at managing so many things in her life. Along with work and school, Alyssa was a part of a registered student organization that worked with youth in the local community. Being so involved with work, school, and organizations left very little

time for leisure. As she explained to me, having so much of her time committed to work, school, or involvement comes with a price tag. The price she paid in order to accomplish everything was in the currency of her well-being. When asked about her stress levels, she stated, “Well my heart rate is consistently above 100 beats per minute.” Alyssa recognized that this was very high and that she should talk to a doctor. With so much going on she said she had to let out steam sometimes. She described a time when she was stressed due to her work and stated,

Last Friday when I found out they moved the date and I had all this stuff I had to do and I couldn't go home until about 10 because I had to get it done, I just sat in my car and screamed for a minute. It made me feel a little bit better, but I am pretty sure people thought I was crazy.

Alyssa said that letting off steam was needed and helped. The program she was stressed about was coming together well. She stated, “As stressful as it is, I love what I do.”

Interestingly, Alyssa said that pretty much everything that caused her stress was self-induced. Her internship with the non-profit organization was not paid and the compensation she earned from her other two jobs paid for part of her living expenses. Alyssa further explained her financial situation for college by stating, “It is kind of like this is more an optional thing, it is not like I have to work in order to stay in school as much as my loans would disagree with me.”

Alyssa also described the financial aid award she received,

It is all loans, grants, and scholarships. I come from a really, really low income family, but luckily it was low income enough that the government pays for everything but then I maxed out my (financial aid) packages.

Alyssa used her total allocation of federal aid during the school year and was not able to receive additional funds for summer classes. This was problematic for her because she needed to take

two classes over the summer to graduate on time. She explained that she was currently in the process of searching for another job over the summer so she could afford the summer tuition bill.

**Academic Experiences.** Alyssa's view on school was that overall, she loved her classes. She said she has always loved learning and never misses class. This was consistent for Alyssa not just in college but also in high school as she said she once went to class with walking pneumonia. Explaining this further she stated, "I love school and I will always love school. There is nothing I have ever wanted to do besides be in school for the rest of my life essentially." Although her love for school was strong, this did not correlate with her participation in the classroom. She described herself when she shared,

If I do need something I would go in during office hours. I do not speak up during class.

You cannot pay me enough to do that. Especially since most of my classes are like 75 to 200 people. No that is not going to happen. So, I will go in during office hours and I will die before I raise my hand in class.

She described herself as a person who liked to "figure it out on my own" rather than have someone explain it to her. When asked about her preparedness for class Alyssa stated that it was probably 50-50. Half of the time she completed the assigned readings prior to class and the other half she described reading and putting together the pieces at a later time.

Alyssa described varying levels of interest in the courses she was required to take for her major. As a student in the College of Business, she was required to take numerous business core requirements. Although she said she hated when other people said this, she thought "I'm never going to use this" when describing her courses such as accounting or management. Interestingly, it was these courses that made up to 50% of classes that she didn't always prepare for. She

enjoyed her major-specific classes and stated that she was usually ahead regarding readings and assignments, but for her management class she put off reading as much as she could.

Another factor that impacted Alyssa's academics was her interactions with her professors. She explained that she had varying thoughts on her faculty instructors. On one side, she believed that some of them had "forgotten what it was like to be in college." Although she said she didn't think professors do it intentionally, they make college harder than it needs to be and rather should be encouraging students. Alyssa explained what one of her professors did what she thought worked well. Alyssa described her professor's view on homework,

[If] for some reason you can't do it, just e-mail me and I will open it up and you can get your full credit. She is like I would rather have you do it, learn it, than not do it on time so you can't do it at all.

Regarding this approach, Alyssa additionally explained, "it kind of shows a more human side rather than this is [college], this is the way it is." Alyssa recognized that this couldn't be applied to everything, but for small things like homework, she thought it worked effectively.

Although Alyssa never took this professor up on her offer of turning things in late, she appreciated the policy. Alyssa had a great relationship with this professor and was enrolled in one of her classes for a third semester. Alyssa frequently visited her office hours and discussed both class and work with her. In addition to having positive emotions about this professor, Alyssa viewed the faculty in the gerontology department favorably. One of her professors was actually the individual who recommended she consider the internship with the non-profit organization once she found out about Alyssa's interests and future aspirations. A different professor also demonstrated care by going the proverbial extra mile after Alyssa submitted an assignment. Although she did not explicitly state what happened, she did share that the actions

these professors took contributed positively to her view of the department and the courses in which she was enrolled.

**Employment Experiences.** Alyssa described her feelings towards her employment experience by stating, “I definitely love what I do and I know that what I am doing is good.” She explained that with her work she never had to worry about whether or not her career was an ethical one. Alyssa was actively employed at not one, not two, but three different organizations. The first was a non-profit unpaid internship in which she participated in as a part of her academic minor. Alyssa worked at the other two organizations, a nursing home and a pharmacy, on the weekend when she went home to a large metropolitan city located about an hour’s drive from Midwestern University.

Even though during a typical week she worked around 20 hours between all three, lately she had been working closer to 40 hours all together. Alyssa had her schedule arranged so that her classes were all in the morning which left her the afternoon to work at her internship during the week. She also worked a great deal of hours on the weekends. She explained by stating, “I work 8 to 4 at the pharmacy on Saturday, the rest of the day at the nursing home and then all day at the nursing home on Sunday. It is essentially I work 8 to 9 on Saturday and 8 to 5 on Sunday. So 13 on Saturday and 8 to 5 so 22”

Alyssa’s job responsibilities at the nursing home and pharmacy were not overly complex compared to everything she was doing in her internship. She worked as a receptionist at the nursing home and a store assistant/cashier at the pharmacy. Differing from these environments, however, Alyssa had very high levels of responsibility and autonomy working with the non-profit. The non-profit Alyssa worked for was involved in the well-being and health of the citizens of the state where Midwestern University was located. Since Midwestern University is

located in the capitol city of the state, many organizations, like the one Alyssa worked for, were located there to work with government lawmakers.

Alyssa's official title with the non-profit organization was public policy intern. Within her role, she traversed often between the organization's headquarters and the capitol where she attended bill hearings and even testified on behalf of the organization for some of the bills. The state legislature had recently passed a plan to increase health services to its aging citizens and Alyssa served on a task force with other non-governmental organizations charged with implementing the plan. Further still as a part of her internship she conducted research to determine the feasibility of parts of the state plan and had the sole responsibility of coordinating a lobbying day for the organization at the capitol. This day on the hill was one the largest responsibilities she had with her internship and created a similarly large amount of stress. Typically, the national headquarters for Alyssa's organization recommended planning six months in advance for the event. Due to changing schedules, Alyssa only had a month to organize it all.

Alyssa admitted that her internship was a lot of work but she also identified the benefits she gained from it. Besides the credit she earned, she recognized that she had made many professional connections and that it was a great resume builder. Through this internship, she specifically stated,

I really get to kind of broaden my horizons beyond just from an academic setting.

Because you know this is your time to expand and learn and grow and it is like yeah they have clubs and classes, but I also get to do something else.

Additionally, she valued the significance of the work she was doing. She explained,

It is not like I'm just a volunteer for this, like it I'm in between staff and volunteering and I really get to do a lot. Like I get to go work at the capitol building which isn't something that a lot of people get to do even as adults so I think that is really neat.

This practical experience was beneficial to Alyssa because she said it allowed her to figure out what she wanted to do for the rest of her life at a young age.

**Extent of Academic and Employment Nexus.** Alyssa's perspective of the connection that existed between her academics and her employment was complex. Initially she shared that she does all that she can to keep her work life separate from her school tasks. She explained,

The thing that I found that is kind of silly that really helps is that I have a work bag and I have my backpack and those do not intersect because otherwise everything I just start getting confused because I will get out my backpack, start working on homework and I see my work stuff and I'm like, 'oh no I have to do that.' So I found out if you keep them separate it makes it a lot better.

Having them separate helped her compartmentalize all of the work she had to do for school and work. She stated that she wasn't a person who could do a multitude of things at once and she found that this strategy helped address the challenge of having so much to do. She described this further stating, "I have to keep them separate even to function because I get so overwhelmed."

For one of her classes she did not enjoy she took all efforts to make sure it did not overlap with what she was doing at work. Describing this Alyssa shared, "I hate it so much so I purposely tell them any accounting stuff I would not give it to me. I don't know how I got a C. I BSed my way to a C. Do not trust me with it. So, not my job. I avoid that like the plague." She also shared she was unable to see the connection between some of her other classes as well such as business law or international economics. However, although she said she tried to keep her

work and academics separate, when a connection was not present in one class she looked ahead to the textbook to try and find something that related to her work. Something that she “wouldn’t mind waking up at 7 in the morning to go to that.”

While Alyssa didn’t end up finding a connection in that class, she explained that there were other classes where she had recognized an overlap. The most obvious connection was that Alyssa received gerontology credit for her internship. She wasn’t required to go to a classroom each week for this credit like her other courses, but she did have assignments that were due where she had to explain what she was learning in the internship.

The connection Alyssa experienced was not solely for her internship course. When referring to her internship she said, “this and gerontology for me go hand in hand.” Three courses were particularly relevant to her work experiences. The first was a course on senior housing, which connected with her work at the nursing home. Secondly, a course on aging public policy, delved into all of the concepts she was working with in her internship. The third course taught about the health challenges aging adults face. This course provided her with the necessary information to understand the experiences of those she was working to help in her internship.

Alyssa admitted that it was more of a struggle to find a connection to her business courses, but there were a few connections she acknowledged. She shared that she learned about aspects of Medicare and the Older American’s Act in one of her economics courses, both of which she knows about from her work. Another example of an overlap in economics existed in learning about tax policies and how it impacts income. This connected to her internship because she was working on a bill that had a fiscal note attached, meaning it would require additional tax funding if passed. Other connections existed but were at a smaller level. This included things such as learning computer spreadsheet skills, professional writing, and awareness of legal terms.



Throughout Alyssa's courses when a connection was made, positive effects occurred. One of the benefits was that Alyssa became more engaged when discussing topics she had experienced in person in her internship. She described it saying, "I really like that I get to jump in because usually she is like does anyone know about Medicare, the difference between Medicare and Medicaid and no one did, but I was like I do." She described a similar increase in engagement in her management class when they were discussing pension plans. Although some students were confused, Alyssa thought to herself "I know what is going." Whenever connections existed, internally she thought, "hey, I'm here, what are we talking about?" During these instances she was more present in class.

Not only was Alyssa more present and engaged in these instances, she also explained she was able to learn content more effectively when a connection existed. She explained this saying,

I feel like I have a much better understanding like in one of my economics class if I get confused and I find a way to tie it back to some aging policy that I know about, I'm like oh ok I know it now.

These connections helped Alyssa understand course content better which led to her increased success as a student. Alyssa admitted that creating opportunities for every student to have these connections would be a challenge. However, she thought that professors could make a point to create connections when students visit office hours.

The largest negative impact of work on Alyssa's academic success was that it limited the amount of time she had for preparing for class and completing assignments. Alyssa viewed time as a very valuable and limited resource. "The time really a big aspect especially as you get higher into your education it is like a lot more outside work. You have hours of reading and all this and I don't have time for that so I skim and then think okay I'll figure it out in class." Alyssa

described how her work commitments impact her success as a student by saying, “I have to go to support meetings [for work] now on a Saturday and I don't have time to read.” It was clear that for Alyssa, a time-trade off existed and she had to choose which was more important to her. She simply could not do it all and had to prioritize.

#### **Case 4: Joe**

**Participant Characteristics.** Joe, a senior graduating in May was an extremely busy and driven individual. Not only was Joe enrolled as a full-time student taking 19 credit hours, he also worked approximately 45 hours a week in a full-time salaried position. Joe described his perspective about everything by stating, “Organization and efficiency are your best friends and the clock seems to be your worst enemy.” If he was not organized, there would be no way he could manage everything. Although he retracted this statement, he initially stated, “I think it is the best part of my day or my life” when referring to his planner that had all of his work events and school assignments in it. He admitted it was not actually the best part of his life but the initial statement provides clarity to the importance of having something to help him keep everything on track.

Joe was set to graduate at the end of the semester with a major in pre-law. On top of school and work commitments he found time to apply to multiple law schools for the following year. By the second time we talked, he had heard back from several schools that he had been admitted but was still waiting to find out about the programs he was most interested in. Once he began hearing back from schools, it was his intention to make on campus visits to help him make a final decision about where he would enroll.

When asked whether or not he thought he would be employed while enrolled in law school, Joe said he was unsure. Having a full-time job has caused him to get used to a certain

standard of living. He described his use of money stating, “I think with my stomach half the time. I love going out. I love having good food, going out for drinks, all that stuff.” He said transition back to “Ramen and Hot Pockets” would be a bit of a struggle.

Even with spending his money on food and going out as an undergrad, regarding debt, Joe stated, “The nice part I will graduate undergrad with very little, so I'm excited about that.” Joe demonstrated a high level of financial responsibility as he stated “I got a car my freshman year and I'm making my own payments. I pay my own rent. Pay my own tuition for the most part.” Joe informed me that his parents help him with part of his tuition bill allowing him to focus on the other bills he had. Joe's purpose for work wasn't entirely just to make money but he described that making money was still an important factor. Joe said there are several internships that would be more related to his major, but they were unpaid. Although he did one unpaid internship he stated, “I just couldn't make that work financially.”

In addition to his employment and academics, during Joe's time in college he found time to be involved in student organizations. He held three executive board officer positions, Vice President, Recruitment Chair, and Secretary. Although when discussing time commitments and balance with work he said Secretary didn't count because he was not working full-time then. He described being able to succeed at recruitment by using delegation. The position of Vice President had more tasks that could be done behind a computer which made it easier to handle because he could do it at any time day or night. Furthermore, Joe was also involved in Pi Sigma Alpha, the national honor society for political science. He said he would have liked to have been more involved and hold an officer position, but due to work commitments he was unable to.

**Academic Experiences.** Joe explained that he has had an overall positive experience with his courses while attending Midwestern University. His coursework began heavily

concentrated in general education and his major, political science. Joe believed that he had done really well in his political science courses. Joe had found a method that helped him achieve success.

Then, of course, after [work] going either to night class or going home getting stuff written and getting started on homework. The one thing that I have to make sure that I do is I can't turn on any time of TV, music until I have my homework done...I can't go into my room until I am ready to be done for the day or I won't get back up. Sometimes I even have to wait to eat, because if I eat I am done. Out for the count. So, I literally walk into the house, I go straight up to the study room which is on the second floor, set my backpack down, take my planner out and figure out what I need to accomplish that night. Like I said, multiple semesters in a row I really tried to do my homework on that futon or our coffee table and I just can't do it. I get distracted, fall asleep, do something, but none of it is productive.

This seemed to be working effectively for Joe as he had a 3.6 grade point average (GPA) during the spring semester of his junior year.

This changed some after that spring semester because he decided he wanted to diversify his knowledge base and complete a business minor. Additionally he believed it would be useful for his future and stated, "If I did go into a small [law] firm I had that business atmosphere and those lessons to be able to run that business efficiently." He also viewed it at the time as a fallback if his applications to law school were not successful.

Joe explained that his business minor has been challenging. Describing the minor he stated, "It is harder than what I would have expected partially because I think I am more apt to reading and writing and numbers just don't seem to make sense to me." He described the classes

as eye opening but as a whole he referred to the minor as, “the bane of [his] existence.” This primarily was due to the detriment these courses had on his overall grade point average. Joe shared that he was at a 3.6 prior to starting the minor and then was at 3.1 when we talked.

One course that was upsetting for Joe was his finance course. This was a course he did not do well in the first time, but was on a better track the second time. The first time he took it, he explained it was “taught very much like a major.” This semester was different. He stated, “Then I get to a new professor this semester, taught like I thought it should be taught, so far anyway. Now I could be completely crazy and we could be starting off slower. But I am really upset that I ended up in [the other] one when I could have very easily have taken this one.”

Joe’s experience in courses for his minor was not all negative. One positive example was his experience in a marketing course. He explained that they often talked about principles Joe was familiar with due to his work experience. He explained his engagement further stating,

Our marketing professor that I went in several times to talk to asked me or looked in my general direction a couple of different times with the social media/marketing part or gorilla marketing or different specific instances, and asking me for examples.

Joe believed the professor to be helpful especially since he tried to help Joe get credit for his work experience. The attempt was unsuccessful because Joe was not a College of Business student, but he appreciated the professor’s offer to help.

Regarding his overall academic experience, one issue particularly frustrated him. Since he knew he wanted to go to law school, sometimes he felt like he did not understand the point of his undergraduate degree. Specifically he stated, “I still dance around the idea that it is silly that I have to, you know, four years of something that really has no bounds on what I am going to do later and three years of grad school that is what I am really excited for and focused on. But, once

again hey, I don't get paid to make those decisions.” Recognizing at this point there was not a lot he could do to change the rules he said he was glad to be completing his degree within four years so he could move on to something that he actually cared about.

**Employment Experiences.** Joe was very accustomed to being employed. He explained to me that he had been working full-time since his sophomore year. From that point forward he had worked at a variety of apartment complexes in marketing and management. Those positions helped him acquire the position he had at the time of our interviews which was a leasing and marketing manager. Joe admitted that although he only got paid for 40 hours a week, he was actually working around 45 or 50 hours. The main reason for this extra amount was due to the fact that they had staffing changes so everyone else was required to pick up the slack.

Finding a way to work 40 hours and still attend class proved to be difficult. Joe said that thankfully he has been able to take a lot of evening and online classes so he has not had to leave work. At the time we spoke, he only had to go to campus during work hours on Tuesday/Thursday from 12:30-1:45. He had one other on-campus class in the evening which took place from 6:30-9:30. Excluding these two, his classes were online. This was different than the semester prior when Joe had more classes on campus and had to work on the weekends to make up the time.

Joe explained that he had a good relationship with his supervisors. If he ever needed anything, they were willing to help out. When asked about whether or not his supervisors were aware of his work, he informed me that they knew his schedule and would occasionally ask how classes were going but most of the time things stayed strictly work related.

Joe's specific duties varied from day to day but as a whole he had to oversee all marketing and leasing activities for the property at which he worked. Joe coordinated a team of

two full time leasing associates and three part-time community assistants. Besides managing these individuals he had numerous other activities he completed on a daily basis. Although it varied some each day, he described the following about his typical day:

So I just need to make sure that we are getting those daily follow-ups done, making sure that we are touching base with potential residents. Then we do a lot of on-campus outreach in the morning typically...Just getting that brand awareness out to campus. The afternoon is typically dealt with tours, any training exercises that we need to do...Then I try to set up, lately I have been getting lackadaisical, but I try to set out you know a half hour to 45 minutes each evening or late afternoon about 4:00 going through and doing a miniature audit and just making sure is A complete, make sure everyone is placed in the right spots for next year and making sure if we don't have something we get it. Of course at the end of the day I have to send a daily report that says, hey, this is what our numbers were today and this is what we did all day and this is how many leases we signed.

Additional responsibilities included weekly conference calls or other communication with the corporate office.

Through this work experience, Joe recognized several areas of benefit and skill development. The most valuable item Joe received from working with this company was the network he was able to establish. When visiting the corporate office he met with the legal office and they told him, "come talk to us after law school" implying that they might have opportunities open for him. In addition, he explained his organization and time management skills were greatly enhanced because they were forced to be "top notch." Joe explained,

I think I will really be able to take advantage of [these skills] in law school because time management and organization are key to making it through...I'm glad I am learning them now so I can ultimately end up better for it in law school.

Other skills that were enhanced by his work included public speaking and project management. He explained that although group projects were always a hassle, he was able to take a leadership role and make them easier to manage. Joe explained that if given the chance again, he would not change anything and was thankful for his work experience.

**Extent of Academic and Employment Nexus.** Joe explained when organizing his scheduled commitments and tasks he viewed his employment and academics as separate. He stated that this helped him manage his commitments and make sure everything on his list got checked off. Having a pre-law political science major caused Joe to not as easily see many connections between his employment and his academics. He described this stating,

I haven't taken too many courses that directly go with my line of work just because the fact that I am that polisci major and hoping to go to law school... but my major isn't related to law [either] it is just a major to get me to law school.

During the summer of Joe's sophomore year he completed an internship with a civic reform organization. Joe explained that this experience did relate to several things from his political science courses. Having a minor in business helped when Joe was identifying places where a connection existed between work and school.

Joe recognized these in several courses including management, marketing, business law, and personal finance. As mentioned previously, a significant amount of information that was taught in Joe's marketing class connected with his work experiences. This had a positive impact on Joe's experience of the course. He became more engaged with each lecture, the coursework,



and developed a stronger connection with the professor. Regarding the impact this had and his feelings about the course, Joe specifically stated,

I [felt like I] should do well. I should always be [in class]. I felt that I was no longer anonymous I guess if that makes sense. I knew if I missed class he was going to know. So I guess it was an ego check but also a check on making sure I was there and accountable for all the homework I turned in and testing and making sure that I did everything in my power to make sure that I was doing well in the course.

Although he didn't explicitly state it, this seemed to have positive impacts on the amount of new knowledge Joe left the course with.

Other connections existed between Joe's academics and employment experiences. Joe recognized there were many concepts and principles of his management class that correlated with his work position. One such concept they discussed was the difference in management and leadership. Joe had employment experiences to associate the concepts with while he was learning them in the class. Joe explained the work experience he pulled from to understand the concept by stating,

While I was the assistant GM over at [another apartment complex] I had a GM that struggled with that concept a lot. She was a very much her first type of atmosphere. So taking that class at the same time, was one helped me to make sure I knew what type of manager I wanted to be and focus those efforts on my staff, but also just being able to subtly help her with that if that makes sense? Because I was kind of that liaison from her down to the staff and so being able to say maybe we could do it this way instead so we don't come off as harsh, you know those types of things.

Joe mentioned that this experience and principle informed the type of manager he was to his employees. Another example existed from management where Joe said he learned about the theoretical importance of the “benefits of a team atmosphere, a positive attitude, and being down in the trenches with your own staff.” Joe described that this course put these principles on the forefront of his mind and impacted the way he treated his employees.

Other connections led to benefits in Joe’s engagement and confidence level in his courses. When a connection existed, the result was positive. Joe understood this, however he just described it as being more challenging since so many of his courses were not directly related to business. Three of Joe’s employees were business majors and he said he could see how they could list countless examples for all of their classes.

About his employees he specifically stated, All three [community assistants] are in the Ad/PR program at [Midwestern University]...they are essentially doing in the classroom exactly what, you know, I would be doing everyday or what they are doing part-time with coming up with different marketing schemes, coming up with different ways to pull people in on our advertisements.

Joe stated that his major and employment were a bit of a mix and if he was in Ad/PR he would be doing everything they talk about in class, in person.

In addition to these positive benefits Joe recognized from his employment, he stated that there were some drawbacks. Most notably, as a student who works 40+ hours a week, he had less time than some of his peers to get everything accomplished. Joe stated if about if he did not work, “I could have these 4.0s every semester. I don’t have any doubt in my mind I could.” Joe explained his lower quality work on assignments and less studying as the primary reason for this.

A time-trade off was experienced by Joe in that the more he worked, the less time he spent on school. This had a negative impact on his success, which he clearly faced when he stumbled and received a grade lower than a C in his finance course. He explained the way he felt that semester saying,

I think I was telling myself that I was going to be okay continuously and then you know just didn't have time to put the effort in. Then, it was also when I just started with [my current company] to the point where it was myself and our regional leasing manager from corporate. So it was just two guys trying to put together this, you know, this office and this new apartment complex and introducing this brand new brand to a campus of thousands of kids.

When asked how many hours he was actually working that semester he shared that it was between 53 and 55 per week. This simply left less time for studying and other school work which contributed to his poor grade.

Joe said he still faces this time trade off even now when he is working closer to 45 hours a week. He said “the nights that I have to end up spending later at the office, I get home later, and then I don't do as much homework and I still want to be in bed about the same time.”

Overall, Joe recognized benefits from the connection between work and school but also faced the challenges of having less time to put towards academics.

### **Cross Case Analysis**

The four cases above describe the overarching phenomenon of students working a considerable number of hours while concurrently enrolled as full-time students. These four cases provide an in-depth description of the experiences of these students. Though this provides beneficial information, the most important component of a collective case study is the analysis of

the quintain. The next section presents the similarities and differences between cases by providing convergent and divergent themes.

**Convergent themes.** Through cross-case analysis, four convergent themes emerged. The themes were: students possessed strong organizational skills which helped them manage their multiple priorities, gaining experience and connections were important to student's employment, students recognized academic benefits from employment, and students spent less time on academics when employed.

*Students possessed strong organization skills which helped them manage their multiple priorities.* All four participants discussed the methods they had used to stay organized to complete the numerous tasks they had between employment and academics. Joe's approach was stated as "organization and efficiency are your best friends." Everything for work and school was added into his planner which he initially claimed was "the best part of my day or life." Similarly Peyton mentioned, "I've learned the importance of reading syllabi and I base my life off of those and schedule and try to look ahead and make sure they are done." When asked about advantages she recognized from her experience Peyton's response of "stronger time management skills" was similar to Kayla's reply of "schedule planning." Alyssa also viewed herself as a very organized person. Although she was referring to work when she stated this she referred to herself as "hyper organized." Alyssa demonstrated this skill in the method she approached the completion of tasks. She explained,

I have a work bag and I have my backpack and those do not intersect....I found out if you keep them separate it makes it a lot better....[I'll] go home, get all the work stuff out of the way because it's fresh in my mind...Then from there I start doing my school work.

These four participants discovered methods to organize their busy lives.

*Gaining experience and connections were important to student's employment.*

Although financial compensation was an important factor for participants, it was not the only consideration or benefit recognized. All four participants acknowledged other motivating factors besides money. Peyton discussed her transition from her previous job to her internship and stated,

I like enjoyed the rec. a lot and I um there was nothing that made me want to leave there...but I got offered the internship and I was like I know I have to take that for the experience. It did happen to pay more, but I don't think I based it too much off payment.

Peyton also described her second job as one that provided her with professional connections. When discussing this she said,

I would definitely classify the [specific sport] office as kind of a connection building thing because I have been interested in sports marketing and it is just nice to have those connections. I'll apply for the marketing athletic department internship this spring and hopefully having some of them as references will help a little bit and will notice that right away and even the people that they know should help.

Alyssa described the value of experience she received through her unpaid internship stating, "I really get to kind of broaden my horizons beyond just from an academic setting. Because you know, this is your time to expand and learn and grow and it is like yeah they have clubs and classes, but I also get to do something else."

Alyssa discussed the importance of experience for securing a job after completing college. She stated, "I will have experience, but I'm just lucky. A lot of students, yeah they might be able to get an internship, but those are like a few months. They want some[one] you know...who has more experience" Joe's thoughts were parallel and stated, "It has also been a

blessing as well just as far as the experience I have gained, the connections I have made.” He described the advantageous networking stating,

You know I have worked for three different corporate offices now and I think I have at least one connection in each one of those offices so if law school doesn’t work out or if I want to work in an in-house counsel with any of those properties or any of those corporations I have someone I can reach out to.

Earning money was important to the participants but all four described the “real world” experience or building connections as important.

*Students recognized academic benefits from employment.* All four participants recognized their employment experience benefited their success as students. Work proved to be a practical experience for students where they could connect what they were learning in class to an example in the working world. Alyssa explained how work aided in her academics by stating, “I feel like I have a much better understanding [when a connection existed], like in one of my economics classes, if I get confused and I find a way to tie it back to some aging policy that I know about, I’m like oh okay I know it now.” Peyton explained congruency with this thought stating,

Before we started the reading about the differences between a leader and a manager I couldn’t have told you the difference and then we talked more about it and now I kind of see myself placing people [at work] in one of the categories by the way I know them and how they act towards me.

Joe explained feeling more responsibility of learning since he had talked with the professor of one of his courses about how his work experience connected to content in the class. Joe stated,

I [felt like I] should do well. I should always be [in class]. I felt that I was no longer anonymous I guess if that makes sense. I knew if I missed class he was going to know. So I guess it was an ego check but also a check on making sure I was there and accountable for all the homework I turned in and testing and making sure that I did everything in my power to make sure that I was doing well in the course.

Kayla shared how her work has helped her in some of her assignments. She explained,

As customer service representative, I get like financial experience, I learn how to work in teams, but also in like a leadership, very entry level kind of management kind of position...that is a lot of skills I get to gain. I can apply them when I am writing papers, when I have to problem solve in accounting cases like when we have to decide what is wrong with the financial statement and what do you think happened that led to this.

These participants benefited academically by having a point of connection to which they could apply what they were learning in class.

*Students spent less time on academics when employed.* Anecdotally, the number of hours participants spent working was negatively correlated with time spent on academics. Time spent at work equaled less time studying or working on assignments. Joe explained how the time spent working impacted his academics by saying, “the nights that I have to end up spending later at the office, I get home later, and then I don’t do as much homework and I still want to be in bed about the same time.” Also he shared how his time compared now to when he didn’t work full-time stating, “So, freshman year studying you know time frame compared to now, definitely more my freshman year.” Likewise Alyssa stated, “I have to go to support meetings [for work] now on a Saturday and I don't have time to read.”

Peyton shared similar views and stated how jealous she sometimes gets of her peers who don't have to work and have much more time to spend studying. She discussed the two days she works all day at her internship stating, "If I had all day on Tuesday's and Friday's to do homework, life would be so easy." Concurrently, Kayla said, "I might have to settle for some B's and C's and I might not be able to qualify for a scholarship after next year, but that is kind of the price you have to pay [for working]." All of the participants described a negative impact of working was having less time for school.

**Divergent themes.** Through cross-case analysis, themes were identified in which participants differed in their thoughts or experiences. The divergent themes described were: students' family background/family financial contribution, degree of stress expressed by students, extent of connection established with professors, and primary role orientation of academics and employment.

***Students' family financial contribution.*** All four participants came from very different family upbringings with varying levels of financial support of their pursuit for a degree. Kayla, explained that her parents didn't qualify for the parent loans so she was on her own for tuition. She also said, "They won't help me with my tuition because they say if I don't pay for it then I won't appreciate it." Kayla explained however that her parents were willing to help her pay for approximately 2/3 of her housing and living costs in the residence halls. Through our discussions, Peyton didn't directly share how much or if her parents assisted her in paying for her costs of attending college. However, she did state,

Yeah, there are peers from my academy and well I come from small town and my dad is a farmer. They'll come from like more like where both their parents are professionals or something...they probably just don't feel like it is a particular financial burden or stress.



I mean it is not like I worry about it all the time, but it is just something that is in the back of your mind.

The conclusion can be drawn from this that her parents are likely not helping her pay for college as much as her peers.

Alyssa explained how she was a first generation college student. She explained that she would be the first on either side of her family to earn a degree. Alyssa did explain however that her father was in the process of earning his degree part-time currently and that they would finish around the same time. Although her internship was unpaid, she worked on the weekends at two locations back home to earn money. When asked if that was to help pay for living expenses she stated, “Yes. My dad helps out, but he doesn’t have a lot either so I’m not going to take a lot from him.” She explained further, “I come from a really, really low income family, but luckily it was low income enough that the government pays for everything.” This indicated that she received the maximum Pell grant amount.

Joe’s familial background and level of financial support received was different than the other participants. Once in our conversations, Joe discussed law school and how he had recently applied to the program his father graduated from. Joe did not share what his mother’s profession was. Regardless, he shared, “I got a lot of scholarships my freshman and sophomore year and then my parents helped me out a little bit.” He explained later he worked out a deal with his parents where he just splits the tuition bill in half. Joe wasn’t sure if he would continue working or not in graduate school.

***Degree of stress expressed by students.*** Two of the students, Kayla and Alyssa expressed that they experienced very high levels of stress as they managed all of their responsibilities. Kayla described the semester we spoke as the “most stressful semester that I have faced.” Further

she expressed her view of stress by stating, “You know, I think that I have my life to relax. As long as I can push myself harder now I should. I mean, it is kind of like a rubber band you can see how far you can pull it.” When asked if and how often the rubber band snapped she shared,

[It] probably happens pretty regularly I think. It probably happens every month and half or two months. Which I know it happens because of how much I push myself...But, there is a price you pay for doing so much and I think having a day when I just break down or cry or have a lazy day where I don't do anything or don't talk to anyone I think that is worth it to have that one day once in a while to be able to do all the things I am doing now.

Likewise, Alyssa also expressed high stress levels. She stated,

Well my heart rate is consistently above 100 beats per minute. I need to go talk to a doctor. I have really high anxiety already so it is like sometimes I am just like last Friday when I found out they moved the date and I had all this stuff I had to do and I couldn't go home until about 10 because I had to get it done, I just sat in my car and screamed for a minute.

Both Kayla and Alyssa mentioned their stress levels at several points throughout our conversations. Stress seemed to be something ubiquitous in their lives. The other two participants, Joe and Peyton, did not mention high stress levels. Although these two individuals did not express why they were not stressed, both were very clear in that they have gained strong time management skills from their employment. One interpretation would be that Kayla and Alyssa are still figuring out how to best manage their time and priorities which leads to higher levels of stress.

*Extent of connection established with professors.* Each of the four participants had varying levels of contact with their professors. Kayla had negative impressions of all of her professors which caused her to be much less likely to attend office hours. Kayla explained that during her time at Midwestern University she, “only went to office hours once.” Instead she tried to rely more on her peers if she did not understand a concept or course requirement.

Peyton expressed mixed thoughts about her professors. She explained, “you can see the ones that are like, um, I’m strictly like I help students during these hours because I’m too busy for you any other time and some who are like yeah, make an appointment.” This level of approachability made a large difference in whether or not Peyton talked with the professor. She explained that she has had one or two professors who were aware of her work experience because they took the time to get to know her. She explained one of her positive experiences attending office hours with this professor stating,

Like when I went today, today was for one question that would have taken about 5 minutes to discuss but like she sat in there and said, how are you, how are your classes going?

Peyton recognized benefit from her conversation with the professor, however she felt that most of her professors did not care or try to talk with students one-on-one.

Alyssa also expressed unsure thoughts about the professors. She believed that most of her professors have not been aware of her work experience. However, she had two professors that she made a connection with. The first professor was in her third semester as teaching one of Alyssa’s courses. Alyssa said “she is my absolute favorite...so I like to follow her around as much as I can.” She also mentioned she goes and visits her office hours “all the time.” This had proven beneficial. Alyssa explained about the professor, “she actually directed me to one of the

professors here who used to be an economic adviser for Bush, to talk to him.” The other professor she established a connection with was a professor of one of her online gerontology courses. She explained her teacher’s response to a paper which spurred a continued dialogue about Alyssa’s concerns with her own family’s situation regarding aging.

Joe similarly believed that very few of his professors knew about his employment. Only two professors knew about his work with them being a marketing professor and a political science professor. The marketing professor was aware because a lot of the concepts covered in his class, Joe had used previously at his work. The professor also tried to help Joe receive credit for his internship but he was unsuccessful. The political science professor knew about Joe’s work because she asked all of her students to complete a “get to know you thing” at the beginning of the semester and because he missed her class once due to a housing fair he had to be at for work.

The participants had varying levels of connection with their professors. Two participants, Alyssa and Peyton, frequently visited office hours to ask questions and to develop relationships with certain faculty members. Kayla and Joe did not mention visiting office hours nearly as much and therefore didn’t have as strong of a connection with their professors.

***Primary role orientation of academics and employment varied.*** The participants had dissimilar views on the way in which they viewed their lives as students and employees. Kayla and Megan strongly understood their roles as student first then employee, Alyssa’s perspective was not quite as clear, and Joe seemed to view his role as employee first, student second. When describing her mentality Kayla stated, “to come across someone in an organization and to have them understand...that school has to come first. That is pretty rare.” Peyton concurred, describing her view stating, “I am usually like, my studies will always come first so the amount

of hours I work kind of depends upon how I feel.” Both Kayla and Peyton said they appreciated that their employer allowed them to have this take on their work.

Alyssa did not describe her role orientation clearly. Whereas Kayla and Peyton clearly stated school came first, Alyssa said about her work, “They are really considerate and they tell me school comes first.” It seemed as though Alyssa was conflicted about whether or not school truly did come first. She discussed one particular event for work several times. Two times she said she appreciated that her supervisor was allowing her to not attend the entire event because she had to go to class. The third time she mentioned the event, she viewed it differently, stating “I’m even going to see if I can get out of that [class]” that she had during the event.

Joe’s perspective on whether or not school came first was different from the previous three. He primarily viewed work as the main priority. This was evident in how he planned his class schedule around work trying to take evening or online classes if they were available. Joe also described the joke his direct supervisor would tell him when he would leave work to go to class. He shared, “I would leave [work] and on my out, he would look at me, shake his head and go, ‘banker’s hours’ and just start laughing. Joe also mentioned how he had missed class once to go to a housing fair for work. Although school was important, Joe’s top priority was his employment.

## **Conclusion**

The information described by each case study participant provided insight on the nexus of students’ academic and employment experiences. An even more important understanding of this group of students was discovered through cross-case analysis. Four converging themes emerged from the analysis of the quintain: students possessed strong organizational skills which helped them manage their multiple priorities, gaining experience and connections were important

to student's employment, students recognized academic benefits from employment, and students spent less time on academics when employed. The students' differed in some aspects, which were highlighted in the divergent themes: students' family background/family financial contribution, degree of stress expressed by students, extent of connection established with professors, and primary role orientation of academics and employment. The results of this multiple case study revealed important information that is imperative for faculty, staff and administrators to understand and inform how they work with this population of students working a considerable number of hours. Potential best practices and recommendations for future research will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

Understanding the nexus of students' academic and employment experiences is crucial for higher education professionals and lawmakers. Previous research studies have demonstrated the significant number of college students who are working many hours while also enrolled as full-time students. There is a general consensus among higher education professionals that employment is not an educationally purposeful activity and something that should only be done in small amounts.

As the cost of higher education has continued to rise, a larger number of students have turned towards employment to find the funds necessary to stay enrolled in school. Although the literature is conflicted, scholars have documented a negative correlation with academics and number of hours worked once a student works at approximately the level of twenty hours a week. The literature is primarily quantitative in nature and provides little insight into the experiences of the students who are living the realities of balancing employment and academics.

#### **Summary of Research**

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to describe the nexus between academic and employment experiences of undergraduate students at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwestern United States. Furthermore, the three following research questions were used to provide direction and focus to the study:

1. How do students describe their academic experiences while employed during the school year?
2. How do students describe their employment experiences while maintaining full-time

student status?

3. How do students describe the connection between their academic and employment experiences?

Four students participated in two semi-structured interviews and provided documents regarding their academic or employment experiences. The data collected by these participants was then analyzed case-by-case and through a cross-case analysis of the quintain. This chapter will address the central themes identified through this research and connect them to previous literature about students who work while simultaneously enrolled full-time. Additionally discussed will be recommendations for practice and future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Through cross-case analysis, four convergent themes and four divergent themes were discovered. The following section discusses these themes and their connection to literature previously conducted by scholars.

**Converging themes.** The following convergent themes were consistent for all four participants: students possessed strong organizational skills which helped them manage their multiple priorities, gaining experience and connections were important to each student's employment, students recognized academic benefits from employment, and students spent less time on academics when employed.

*Students possessed strong organizational skills which helped them manage their multiple priorities.* In order to manage the many events and responsibilities these students had going on in their lives, they found ways to keep themselves organized. Although this looked a slightly differently for each student, the development of strong organization skills was present throughout all four students. Two examples were Joe's reliance on his planner and characterizing



it as the best part of his life and Alyssa maintaining two separate bags, one for school and one for work to compartmentalize her responsibilities. Specifically the increase in organizational skills has not been mentioned recently in the literature. However, Hammes & Haller (1983) found that their participants increased their organizational skills similar to the results found in this study. Additional studies indicated the development of time management skills which is related to organization (Curtis, 2009; Chang & Alcantra, 2004; Curtis & Williams, 2002). The present study adds to the literature more recent support of the findings about the development of organizational skills by Hammes & Haller (1983).

***Gaining experience and connections were important to each student's employment.***

Earning compensation to pay for their college expenses was an important reason for the participants desire to work, however this was not their only motivation. All of the participants acknowledged the importance of gaining experience and building connections. Each individual was very focused on how their time spent working would allow them to be successful in gaining employment in the future. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Coates (2013) and Cheng and Alcantara (2007). Coates (2013) discovered that employed students gained networking opportunities and skills contributing to greater employability. Cheng and Alcantara (2007) identified a similar view to what was found in this study. They stated that once students started off working they saw other benefits, including networking and the development of skills through work experience. These two previous studies were completed via quantitative and qualitative focus groups methods, respectively. This current study appears to support the previous findings, however, it adds to the literature the voices of students regarding their specific experiences discovered through one-on-one interviews.

***Students recognized academic benefits from employment.*** For students in this study, the purpose of working was not to recognize academic benefits, but it was an outcome all four participants described as a result of their employment. The participants primarily gained an advantage from their work by having a connection point for which to orient course content around. When the participants were able to find a method to connect the knowledge they possessed from their work experience to specific course concepts they had higher levels of understanding and engagement in the course. Additionally, the participants gained an increased level of confidence because they were more familiar with some of the concepts they were learning in their course because they had learned some form of it during their employment.

The academic benefits students earned in their employment has been documented previously through quantitative research. Kramer & Usher (2011) identified that students' work experience provided an enhanced appreciation of content learned in their academic studies. Robotham (2012) discovered similar results, finding that students' work allowed them to relate more to what they learn. The present study is in line with the findings of the quantitative studies and eliminates a gap in the literature by providing qualitative data to more completely describe this connection of academics and employment.

***Students spent less time on academics when employed.*** Although time spent in employment benefited students academically, it also was detrimental. As students put more time into their employment, they had to find somewhere to cut time. For these students, it hardly was a matter of choice but it was necessary for them to decrease the time spent on academics. The participants in the study indicated that preparing for class was not as important as other time commitments because they would pick up on whatever they were discussing in class and manage well enough.

The time-trade off hypothesis was described in several instances in the literature. This concept, meaning that as students spent more time on employment they decreased the amount of time spent on academics, was found to be in effect by several researchers (Safron et al., 2001; Greene & Maggs, 2015; Kulum & Cramer, 2006; Baum, 2005). The research through these studies was quantitative in form. The present study found support for the time trade-off hypothesis in the experiences shared by the participants identified through qualitative methods.

Other literature states an equal time contribution to academics by working and non-working students (Lang, 2012). Although this study did not investigate non-working students, if non-working students did contribute the same amount of time towards academics, it is likely they recognized greater levels of leisure time. The working students in this study admitted to the very limited amount of leisure time that they were able to fit in their schedule due to work and class commitments. The time trade-off hypothesis is likely to be more accurate for students who work a considerable number of hours because when they work, they have no other area of time to cut out of their lives except for academics. Whereas, students who do not work at all or for as many hours, even if they work more, they perhaps are able to decrease their leisure time to still spend an equal amount of time studying as they did prior to working.

**Diverging themes.** Students differed in the following four themes: students' family background/family financial contribution, degree of stress expressed by students, extent of connection established with faculty members, and primary role orientation of academics and employment.

*Students' family financial contributions.* The financial support provided by each participants' family differed. The average expected family contribution for

families that had students attended a public doctoral institution was identified by Choy and Berker in 2002 to be \$1,500 and \$9,000 for low income and middle income families respectively. Three of the four participants explained approximately how much their parents contributed to their education ranging from: one's parents helped pay half of tuition costs, another's parents helped pay for two-thirds of residence hall costs, and the third indicated her father assisted her with a slight amount for living expenses. The participants did not explicitly identify which income bracket their family would be placed in, however, the levels of family contribution identified by Choy and Berker (2002) likely represented the contributions of the participants' families.

The level of family support participants experienced determined the amount they would have to borrow in the form of loans to pay for their education. According to College Board (2015), in 2013-14 60% of college graduates earned their degree by taking on an average debt of \$25,500. Not all of the participants identified exactly the amount of debt they had accrued, however one identified being able to graduate almost debt free. Yet still another however, anticipated graduating with approximately \$40,000, well above the average of \$25,000. The other two participants did not specify the exact amount of money they had borrowed, but both did see the amount as significant in their views. All four of participants expected to graduate with debt which differs from the national average of 60% graduating with debt.

***Degree of stress expressed by students.*** The degree of stress expressed by the participants in this study varied. Two of the participants experienced extremely high levels of stress whereas the other two did not mention their stress levels at all. The finding that not all participants expressed high levels of stress was surprising considering what the literature indicated. Numerous authors discovered that students who worked experienced higher levels of anxiety and

stress (Mounsey, Vandehey, & Diekhoff, 2013; Bradley, 2006; Holmes, 2008). Further explaining this, Robotham (2009) stated that working reduced students' ability to handle the stress that occurred. This seemed to be true for the two participants who described themselves as stressed. The responsibilities they had at work not only reduced the amount of time to take care of other stressors, it was also an additional source of stress.

*Extent of connection established with faculty members.* The participants in this study had varied experiences with their faculty members. One participant was not pleased at all with her professors and did not think they cared about her as a person. The others at least had one professor who they established a connection with, two of the participants had a strong connection with more than one faculty member. The number of hours students worked led to different conclusions about students' experiences with faculty. Pike et al. (2008) and Hakes discovered that students working less than 20 hours a week had more positive interactions with faculty members.

However, Pike et al. (2008) found that students who worked more than 20 hours on- or off-campus responded with lower scores for items in the supportive campus environment category, comprising of items regarding students' interactions with their peers, faculty, and administration. This finding aligns with the majority of the experiences the participants had with their faculty members. Although the participants differed in the number of strong connections they had with faculty, overall they did not believe their faculty were aware of, or would care to know about their work experiences. This supports Pike et al.'s (2008) finding that the participants did not feel supported because a large portion of individuals on campus were not even aware of how much they worked or the impact it had on them. Working students may have stronger connections with faculty because they have more experience interacting with adults in a

professional manner. However, once work reaches the level of over 20 hours a week, the lack of time available to interact with faculty becomes a large challenge due to the inability to attend office hours or stay after class to talk more in depth about concepts.

*Primary role orientation of academics and employment.* Another factor the four participants differed on was their view of whether school or work came first on their list of priorities. Two of the participants stated that they had informed their employers that their priority was school then work. Another participant never specifically stated she viewed school first but due to the fact her internship was coordinated through the university, her employers often reminded her that school was supposed to come first. The final participant was on the complete other end of the spectrum in that he first organized his life around his full-time job and then fit school in where he could.

This role orientation of students was described in the literature as having a significant impact on students' persistence from first to second year (Mamiseisvili, 2010). None of the students in the study were in their first year of college, however their responses supported the idea that lower persistence might exist for working students in subsequent years. Although role orientation was important, one participant, with a role orientation of work first, was still able to persist and be on track for graduation. Warren (2002) accurately described role orientation by recognizing its importance but not the sole determinant of students' success. This accurately describes the views of the participants in that their persistence was not solely dependent upon whether or not they viewed school or work first in their lives.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research study identified important information about the experiences of students who work a considerable number of hours while concurrently enrolled as full-time students. The

findings from this study are beneficial for higher education faculty, staff, and administrators because it documents the actual entirety of working students' experiences. As described by the participants of this study, there is a vast disparity in the knowledge faculty members have about the actual experiences of their students.

This disparity is one that higher education has faced for many years. Magolda (1997) described the disconnect between his understanding of students and their actual realities. He explained that he had believed he was a strong advocate for students prior to his ethnographic study, however after the completion of the study, he came to the conclusion that "student life was life as [he] didn't know it" (p.16). He explained how higher education professionals state they are focused on the development of the whole student, however, when it comes to learning in the classroom, students are expected to "check all of their nonacademic baggage at the door." Further, he insisted that educators should create opportunities for students to integrate their experiences into academics (Magolda, 1997).

The disconnect Magolda experienced between what he thought he knew about students compared to what he actually did know is the same issue that is plaguing the ability for deeper connections to be established between students and faculty today. Faculty members have a significant opportunity to learn about students due to their nature of interacting with every single student on a regular basis. Several of the participants indicated that their professors began the semester with some "get to know you" type of activity or assignment. The more that faculty can create spaces for students to share their experiences with them, the more informed the faculty member will be.

Even though knowledge about students experiences in itself is helpful for faculty to know, this cannot be the end of the integration of work into class. Rather, once faculty know

more about where their students work, they should look for opportunities to connect course concepts with students' experiences. Understandably, it would be unrealistic to incorporate an example based every students' work experience into every class, however, this should not mean that faculty don't try to create connections when possible. The more connections that are drawn to real experiences, the greater the levels of learning students will recognize. It is not acceptable for faculty to expect their students to leave their non-academic baggage at the door. Students are holistic individuals and it is imperative that educators treat teaching in a similar manner, encompassing and integrating students' experiences.

Higher education professionals have traditionally discouraged students from participating in part-time work while enrolled as a student because they see it as only a means to secure the necessary financial resources for school (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2007). This is a perspective that needs revamping across higher education for two reasons. Firstly, the view that students simply should not work or should work only a few hours is unrealistic as it ignores the financial realities students face. Approximately 75% of all dependent students work while enrolled in college at an average of 24 hours a week (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2007). The participants of the present study admitted that they simply had no other option but working in order to pay for their school or living expenses.

Secondly, higher education professionals should not discourage students from pursuing employment because the findings of this study documented how work can provide educational benefits. Although it hasn't historically been viewed as an educationally beneficial activity, students who work have a greater wealth of experiences to draw from when completing assignments or participating in class discussions. Rather than using our resources as higher education professionals to advise students away from work, we should use those resources to



create programs for working students to help them recognize the educational benefits they are gaining from employment.

Universities across the country have begun to recognize the value of work and strongly encourage or require students to participate in internships as a requirement for graduation. The exact form of these internship requirements varies from university to university and often even from department to department within a university. Midwestern University was similar to other institutions across the country in that some departments required internships while others did not. Depending on the department, students were able to receive credit for their internships. Due to being a means to earn credit, students were required to document their learning in some manner.

One participant in the study participated in an internship for credit. The program assisted her in finding an internship and then worked with the non-profit organization to establish a list of expectations for the organization and her as the intern. Additionally, the participant was required to complete assignments throughout her internship connecting her work experience with what she had previously learned in other courses. Universities should strive to create opportunities such as this one for every student.

Midwestern University had an additional program available to working students to earn credit for their work. The university's career service office offered a directed field experience course for students. This incorporated a wide variety of components including skill development, an informational interview, creation of job search documents, and a unit on connecting work to courses taken or future goals. While this was a great opportunity for students to earn credit for their work, the class enrollment typically averaged around 15 students. The enrollment of the course was limited due to the minimal amount of resources provided to facilitate the course.

Two of the participants in this study indicated their desire to earn credit for their working experience however they were not aware of the opportunity offered through the career services office. It is likely that there are many other students on Midwestern University's campus and campuses across the country that would like to receive credit for their work, however, they are unaware of the opportunities available to them. We as higher education professionals should seek to promote programs such as these to a larger portion of students and find innovative ways to reach these students who typically do not spend a large amount of time on campus other than for their classes.

One final recommendation for faculty and staff at higher education institutions is in regard to the availability of appointments and office hours. One participant in the study mentioned how she was limited in her opportunity to meet with an academic advisor or attend office hours due to her work commitments. When not in class, her employers required her to be at work during typical 8:00am-5:00pm business hours. These business hours are the same hours faculty and staff are available to students. Faculty and staff should consider making times available to students outside of the traditional working hours to allow working students the opportunity to receive the assistance they need. This would not have to be an everyday occurrence, however, something such as later hours once a month for students could provide these students an opportunity to connect that they are not currently provided.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on the experiences of working students is extremely limited in the literature. Although there is a significant amount of quantitative data, very little exists in a qualitative form that describes the realities facing working students. This study fills an important gap in the literature by providing explanations about the ways working students manage the many

responsibilities they possess in their academics and employment. Additionally, this study provides a description of the nexus of students' academic and employment experiences, a topic that has only slightly been explored in the literature.

Although this study addresses some of the gaps that were in the literature, there are still many more issues that need to be studied. Regarding this study, there were several limitations that should be addressed by future research. All of the students studied had some connection to the College of Business Administration. Three of the four students majored in business and one was earning a minor in business. Future research should seek to engage the voices of students who did not have a connection to business, where one might assume there would be more opportunities for connections between academic and employment experiences. Additionally, each of the participants in this study identified as white and cisgender. Including the perspectives of students with more diverse backgrounds in areas such as race, ethnicity, non-binary gender, or nationality would provide more insight as to how different types of students experience the nexus of academics and employment.

This study explored the experiences of students who worked at least 20 hours a week. The literature documented that there was more of a probability that students who worked less than 20 hours a week would recognize gains from employment. The decision to focus on students working 20 hours or more was due to the intent to explore whether or not this population of students recognized similar positives or just negatives from their work experience. Further research should be conducted to determine if the same nexus existed for students working less than 20 hours a week.

Another area not addressed within the confines of this study is the experience faculty members have had with working students. As described by the participants of this study, some

faculty were more aware and intentional about incorporating students work experience than others. Understanding more in depth why and how these professors strive to connect students' experiences would be beneficial research to provide other faculty members who struggle with the concept.

Researchers should additionally explore the nexus that exists for the population of students that earns credit for their work. Understanding whether or not these students recognized positive learning gains of content due to their connection of academics and employment would be beneficial for higher education professionals to know the outcomes of these types of courses. The present study documents that there are positive benefits that can be recognized from students' employment, further research needs to be completed to understand what contexts most successfully create these benefits.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the nexus of students' academic and employment experiences for full-time students who worked on average 20 hours or more a week. The data collected from a clearer picture of the potency of the nexus between academics and employment. Students in this study and across the country constantly find themselves managing the nexus between these two components, academics and employment. This study described how this nexus is a powerful place where students recognize academic benefits while also recognizing challenge due to time spent at work leading to less time spent on academics in the form of studying, reading, or completing assignments.

Discovered in this study were numerous findings including the reasons for students' employment, the ways in which they managed their commitments, and the advantages and disadvantages they experienced. Through these findings, the study challenged higher education

professionals to rethink their views on students' employment experiences and to find ways to more fully integrate these experiences into the learning that occurs within and beyond the classroom. While acknowledging that there are additional gaps in the literature, this study provides a clearer understanding of the ways students experience the nexus of their academic and employment experiences.

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**Appendix A**

**Institutional Review Board Approval Letter**

November 30, 2015  
Ryan Patterson

Department of Educational Administration  
Debra Mullen

Department of Educational Administration  
239 MABL, UNL, 68588-0234

IRB Number: 20151115813 EX  
Project ID: 15813  
Project Title: Exploring the Nexus Between Students Academic and Work Lives: What Can Be Learned?

Dear Ryan:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 11/30/2015.

1. Your stamped and approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant. Please use this document to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the document, please submit the revised document to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,  
Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB

**Appendix B**  
**Informed Consent Form**



**Title:** Exploring the Nexus Between Students' Academic and Work Lives: What Can Be Learned?

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this collective case study is to describe the nexus between academic and employment experiences of undergraduate students at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwestern United States. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate full-time student with at least 27 credit hours completed, 19 years of age or older, and work off campus at least 20 hours per week on average during the school-year.

**Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require approximately two hours of your time. You will be asked to participate in two interviews for this study and provide documents related to your academic and work experiences. The first interview will be to discuss your roles as a student and an employee. The second interview, approximately three weeks after the first interview, will be to discuss the convergence of these two roles and any benefits or drawbacks that arise from working while also a student. Both interviews will be audio recorded and conducted in a quiet, private space at your convenience. Between the first and second interview, you will be asked to photograph anything that represents to you the convergence of your identity as a student and employee. You will be requested to email these photographs to the primary investigator who will then print them and bring them to the second interview to be used as a point of discussion. Additionally, you will be asked to provide the primary investigator with your current and previous semester's course schedule and a typical weekly schedule.

**Benefits:**

This study will give you the opportunity to reflect on your unique experiences as a full-time student who works a considerable amount of hours and how that has impacted your learning while enrolled at this university. Participating in the study may allow you to make greater meaning of your experience and will allow you to share your experience with others anonymously for the benefit of institutions and other students who work while enrolled.

**Compensation:**

Participants will each be entered into a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card to a grocery store chain. The winner of the gift card will be selected at random and notified by March 1, 2016, following completion of both sets of interviews. If participants only participate in one interview, they will not be entered into the drawing. There is a 1 in 4 chance of receiving the gift card but overall odds will depend on the number of participants who complete both interviews.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept confidential. The researcher will select a pseudonym to use in the transcription of interviews to protect your identity. The data will be stored in a password protected computer, in the possession of the primary researcher or in the primary researcher's locked desk in the researcher's office. The data will only be seen by the principal and secondary investigators during the study, and will be discarded immediately after the study report is finalized in May 2016. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional conferences, but the data will be unidentifiable.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research by contacting one of the investigator(s) listed below. If you would like to speak with someone else, please contact the Research Compliance Services Office at (402) 472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss

of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

By checking this box, I agree to have my interviews with the researcher audio recorded.

**Name and Phone Number of Investigator(s)**

Ryan Patterson, Graduate Assistant, Principal. cba-rpatterson@unl.edu or 402-472-7272  
Deb Mullen, Ph.D. Associate Dean of Education and Human Sciences and Research Advisor.  
dmullen1@unl.edu, 402-472-5426

**Appendix C**

**Recruitment Email to Academic Advisors and Career Coaches**

***Recruitment Email to Academic Advisors/Career Coaches***

Dear (Academic Advisors or Career Coaches):

I am an Associate Dean in the College of Education and Human Sciences. I am working with a master's student in Educational Administration program who is completing original research for a thesis as a requirement for his graduation. My advisee, Ryan Patterson, is conducting a research study that explores the nexus of students' academic and work experiences. If you know a full-time undergraduate student at this institution with at least 27 credit hours, who work 20 hours or more a week, and who is at least 19 years of age, Ryan would appreciate your assistance in recruiting participants for his study.

In this study, students will be asked to participate in two 30-60 minute interviews and to provide their current and previous semester's course schedule, a typical weekly schedule, and digital photographs that represent their identities as students and employees. For their time, participants will each be entered into a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card to a grocery store chain. If you have met with any students who meet the participant requirements and might be interested in participation, please provide them with this email and Ryan's email address. Please encourage them to reach out to Ryan as soon as possible but no later than December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Ryan will provide interested students with further instructions about participation in the research study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either Ryan or myself.

Ryan Patterson, Graduate Assistant, Principal Investigator  
[REDACTED]

Deb Mullen, Ph.D., Associate Dean of Education and Human Sciences and Research Advisor  
[REDACTED]

**Appendix D**

**Recruitment Email to Known Student**

Dear (participant's name):

Thank you for your interest in the research study I am conducting as a part of my requirements for my master's degree. The goal of my research is to describe the academic experiences and learning that occurs for students working off-campus. Participation in the study will entail participating in two 30-60 minute interviews and providing your current course schedule, typical weekly schedule, and photographs that represent the convergence of your identity as a student and employee.

To compensate for your time, you will be entered into a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card to a grocery store chain following completion of both interviews. The winner of the gift card will be selected at random and notified by March 1, 2016. The odds of winning will be approximately one out of four, with final odds dependent on the number of participants who complete both interviews.

In order to qualify as a participant you must:

1. Be a full-time undergraduate student with at least 27 credit hours completed
2. Be 19 years of age or older
3. Work on average 20 hours or more a week off-campus

If you are still interested in participating and meet the qualifications, please respond to this email by December 18, 2015. Please include in your response your current place of employment, the average number of hours worked per week, number of academic credits completed (including ones currently enrolled in), and your academic major. You will be notified whether or not you have been selected as a participant no later than January 18, 2016.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact either myself or my thesis advisor, Deb Mullen, at the contact information listed below.

Regards,

Ryan Patterson, Graduate Assistant, Principal Investigator  
[REDACTED]

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**Appendix E**  
**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

**Interview Protocol #1**

1. First, I was hoping you could tell me a bit about your academic major, the courses you are enrolled in, and your current job(s).
2. With so many things going on between being a student and working, how do you make sense of these identities?
3. Tell me more about your experiences as a student in the classroom.
  - a. During a typical week, how well prepared do you feel for your coursework?
  - b. What level of participation do you have during a typical week in your classes?
4. Tell me more about your current work experience.
  - a. What does a typical work week look like for you?
  - b. How does the time you spend at work impact your success as a student?
5. As you think about your average day, are there places where your work experience overlaps with your experiences in your coursework?
6. What concepts or theories have you learned in your coursework that could apply to your work experience?

**Interview Protocol #2**

1. Tell me about the photos you have taken over the last several weeks. How do they represent the convergence of your identity as a student and an employee?
2. Talk to me again about any overlap you may experience between your work experience and your experiences in your coursework.
3. What portion of your faculty instructors have been aware of your work experience?
  - a. What benefits, if any, could come from your faculty instructors being aware of your work?
  - b. What drawbacks, if any, could come from your faculty instructors being aware of your work?
4. To what extent is your supervisor at your work aware of your experiences in the classroom?
  - a. What benefits, if any, could come from your supervisor being aware of what you are learning in your coursework?
  - b. What drawbacks, if any, could come from your supervisor being aware of you are learning in your coursework?
5. As you consider your multiple identities as a student and an employee, what disadvantages exist for you as a student who works?
6. As you consider your multiple identities as a student and an employee, what advantages exist for you as a student who works?
7. As you consider your multiple identities as a student and an employee, what advantages exist for you as an employee?
8. Are there things we haven't talked about that you would like to bring up?