Part-Time Worker. Part-Time Students

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The modern college student doesn't just study, they hustle. Yes, there are lectures and labs, papers and exams, but for many, these are only part of the equation. The rest? Shifts at fast food joints, commutes between campus and work, budget spreadsheets that never quite balance. Financial hardship is no longer an outlier; it's practically baked into the student experience. With tuition ballooning, rent spiking, and institutional support lagging behind, students are often forced into uncomfortable trade-offs. As Qian and Wei (2020) point out, a growing number of students now rely on part-time jobs not just to cover basic needs, but to preserve a fragile sense of independence in systems that rarely protect their well-being. Some might call this grit. Others might see it for what it is: survival. While part-time work may be necessary for some, it frequently undermines academic performance, strains mental health, and narrows future prospects, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds who have the least margin for error.

Trying to learn while holding down a job often feels like a high-wire act, minus the safety net. Academic performance tends to take the first hit. The tug-of-war between schoolwork and shifts leads to missed deadlines, half-finished readings, and a sense of constant triage. Genett (2017) found a clear link between part-time employment and lower GPAs, especially among those clocking 30 or more hours each week. There are, of course, edge cases: students who manage to land jobs that complement their academic goals. But they are outliers. For most, the toll on energy and attention is too steep. Sure, some argue that juggling work cultivates time management, and occasionally it does. But there's a difference between learning to prioritize and being forced to sacrifice one priority for another. After eight hours on your feet, staring down a research paper due at midnight doesn't build character, it builds exhaustion. And exhaustion doesn't show up on transcripts. It shows up in the slow erosion of engagement: the student zoning out during lectures, skipping class to pick up extra hours, or submitting copied assignments out of sheer desperation. Some push through. Others buckle. It's not unusual to see students dozing off in class after a graveyard shift, barely able to keep their heads up. Come exam week, they're often

flying solo, classmates busy, professors unavailable, resources out of reach. And when they fail, the story often gets twisted: not enough discipline, not enough drive. But rarely do people ask, how could anyone thrive under these conditions?

There's also the emotional terrain, which is harder to map but just as treacherous. Students who toggle between work and school often find themselves emotionally frayed. Stress builds quietly but relentlessly, gnawing away at focus, sleep, and motivation. Rogers and Sprung (2020) identified poor work-life balance as a significant predictor of anxiety and depression in students. Wang et al. (2024) added that students multitask at nearly twice the rate of seasoned professionals, and the ones with the heaviest workloads report the lowest emotional well-being. The result? Some students grow distant, irritable, or numb. Others cling to slivers of normalcy, venting to friends during breaks, laughing too hard at a joke in class, not because it's funny, but because the alternative is silence. The real heartbreak is that resilience is too often romanticized. Yes, students adapt. Yes, some power through. But calling this resilience ignores the very real absence of support. Many students can't afford the luxury of rest. They're not learning to be stronger; they're learning to survive in conditions that should never have been normalized. Without time to decompress or access mental health services, even the most determined student can burn out. And when they do, it's rarely sudden, it's a slow fading away. Missed classes. Dropped courses. A degree that keeps getting further out of reach.

And the burden? It doesn't fall evenly. Students from underprivileged backgrounds bear the brunt. They often work longer hours, not for extra spending money, but to keep the lights on, or help pay a sibling's tuition. For them, college isn't just about personal achievement; it's about lifting an entire family. Davis (2023) reports that employment negatively affects both academic performance and persistence, especially for those logging over 28 hours a week. Scholarships and financial aid are supposed to ease this strain, but in reality, they rarely go far enough, or arrive on time. So students hustle. They do what they must. And in doing so, they shoulder a weight the university seldom acknowledges. The results are predictable: missed credits, delayed graduation, or worse, dropping out altogether. Part-time work, framed as an opportunity, often becomes a trap. Those with financial backing get to focus, flourish,

and network. Those without it must choose: food or a final, a paycheck or a practicum. And if they falter, the system shrugs.

For many, it's not just a struggle. It's a quiet injustice. There are students, brilliant, capable, who lie awake at night wondering if this is all worth it. If their dreams will survive one more semester of sleep deprivation and double shifts. Some think about quitting. Some nearly do. But they stay. For their siblings. Their parents. Their future children. Not because the system helped them, but because it didn't, and they still refused to give up.

We often talk about college as a proving ground. But what happens when the proving ground starts to feel like a pressure cooker? Maybe it's time to rethink not just how we support students, but why we've come to accept struggle as a rite of passage. The goal shouldn't be to discourage student work altogether. Experience has value, yes. But real reform would ensure students don't have to sacrifice health or potential just to make it through. That means designing systems, financial, emotional, academic, that support the whole person. Not because it's generous. But because it's fair. Because talent shouldn't hinge on a bank balance. Because education should lift people up, not wear them down.

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