Homework? What Homework?

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG | DECEMBER 06, 2002

Students seem to be spending less time studying than they used to

During a recent class session of "Strategies for College Success" at the University of Utah, students traded tips on how to prepare for a big test.

"Say a prayer -- that's what I do," said one student. Another suggested eating peanut butter or other brain foods. A third said she unwinds by listening to Enya the night before.

The tip given most consistently by professors and college officials is that students should simply do their homework. The most commonly prescribed amount is at least two hours of class preparation for every hour spent in the classroom -- meaning 25 to 30 hours a week for a typical full-time student. The idea is that students should consider college their full-time job, and that class time and preparation should take about 40 hours each week. That's long been the conventional wisdom.

But many students across the country say they don't come close to following that study regimen. Results from the latest National Survey of Student Engagement, released last month, found that only 12 percent of last year's freshmen at four-year residential colleges reported spending 26 or more hours per week preparing for classes, while the majority, 63 percent, said they spend 15 or fewer hours on class preparation, which the survey defines as "studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to your academic program."

"Students are studying about one-third as much as faculty say they ought to, to do well," said George D. Kuh, director of the survey and a professor of higher education at Indiana University at Bloomington.

The most striking statistic: Nineteen percent of full-time freshmen say they spend only 1 to 5 hours per week preparing for classes. Many education experts say that is well below the minimum needed to succeed. And seniors who answered the same survey reported studying even less than freshmen, with 20 percent studying 1 to 5 hours per week.

Are students today studying less than those of past generations? It’s difficult to say, in part because the student-engagement survey, the most comprehensive source of data on the topic, is only three years old.

But a look at student study habits on a few residential campuses confirms, albeit largely anecdotally, that students are not spending much time studying. And many professors say their students are doing less homework these days, though there are always a few model students. The problem may start in high school, where students are apparently spending far less time on homework than those who graduated a decade ago. Some researchers say professors may be partly to blame for students' poor homework habits because they have lowered the bar for what they accept as passing work. And some professors may even assign fewer papers than they did in the past, so they won't have to spend as much time on grading. But professors say that too many of their students are too focused on grades rather than on learning.

"I am concerned about how little time students are spending in the academic enterprise," said John Gardner, executive director at Brevard College's Policy Center on the First Year of College. "That really troubles me."

Range of Habits
On a recent Thursday afternoon at the University of Maryland at College Park, two students in the food court erupted in laughter when asked if they spend 25 hours a week studying.

"Oh, my God, not even," said Melissa Kim, a senior majoring in biology. She guessed that maybe "one in a million" studied that much. "They're the ones who can't lead a normal life." She said she spends just a few hours preparing for classes during a typical week.

Her friend, Ali Forghani, said he spends just two hours studying most weeks, but that he crams as much as 20 hours during exams. He said he has a 3.0 grade-point average. "I'm trying to go to dental school," he said, "so I don't want my grades to be worse than they are."

At a nearby bus stop, Lisa James, a junior majoring in family studies, said she spends about 10 hours a week studying, which she considers a typical college workload. Jaydutt Shukla, a sophomore, said he spends at least 20 hours each week studying, including about 10 hours writing programs for his computer-science courses.

"Our 10-year average is 14.8 hours of studying a week," said Marcy Fallon, director of Maryland’s Learning Assistance Service, part of the university's counseling center. She said that she's not sure if 25 hours was ever the norm for students at Maryland or anywhere else.

"It’s something we still preach, but have I ever met a student who does it? Probably not," Ms. Fallon said. "As much as we preach it, they're not doing it."

Ms. Fallon said she worries most about the students she encounters taking four or five courses, but who study only six to 10 hours per week. "That's a problem," she said. "You’re clearly not doing what you need to do to be fully effective."

But the sheer number of hours spent buried in books is not as important as whether students know how to manage their time and get the most out of their studying. "I like to say, 'Reading does not equal learning,'" said Ms. Fallon. "You’ve got to do something more with that by working with the material on a day-to-day basis."

Bruce W. Tuckman, a professor of educational policy at Ohio State University, agreed. He has had students create detailed logs of their study time.

"Mostly they discover that they spend a lot of time that doesn’t add up to anything," Mr. Tuckman said, noting that the biggest problem for students is procrastination. "It’s not that they don’t study enough, but they don’t study well."

Most students, however, are never taught how to study. "We call it the hidden curriculum," said Ms. Fallon. "It's the thing that we sort of expect that teachers are teaching, but are they really doing it?"

Less Preparation

Poor study habits seem to start in high school.

That was the case for Billy Goodner, a junior majoring in mathematics at the University of Texas at Austin, who was hard at work at the main library on a recent Friday afternoon.

"I study a lot," he said, estimating that he spends 40 hours a week on homework. But in high school, things were different.

"I didn’t work at all in high school -- the mind-set back then was just different," he said. "I wasn’t prepared for the sheer amount of work that has to be done for every class in college."

A national study based on a survey of first-year students, "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2001," shows that time spent studying in high school has steadily dropped since 1987, when questions about the topic were first used. In 1987, about 53 percent of students reported spending fewer than 6 hours per week on homework and studying, while in 2001, that number jumped to 65 percent.
There’s been a definite decline over time in the amount of time students are spending studying or doing homework in high school, said Linda J. Sax, director of the survey and head of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Curiously, these same students’ high-school grades are “higher than ever,” she said. In turn, students feel entitled to good grades when they do the same amount of work in college.

That troubles Ms. Sax. “Students are becoming more professionally oriented,” she said. “We’re seeing growing numbers of students who are concerned with college as a means to an end -- getting into a good graduate school or getting a good job. Even my students, they calculate, ‘If in-class discussion is 10 percent [of my grade], is it really worth my time to participate in class?’ It’s a calculated decision about how much effort to put in.”

John Janovoy Jr, a professor of biological sciences who has taught for more than 25 years, said he’s seen a similar trend among his students. “Careerism is absolutely rampant in higher education today,” he said. “Kids are coming to school better prepared to try to make good grades” rather than explore new topics.

Puffed-up grades, some suggest, has aggravated students’ attitudes about their studies.

"Grade inflation makes a student think it’s difficult to tolerate a bad grade or two," said Harvey C. Mansfield, a Harvard University professor of government who has been a vocal critic of grade inflation. "Students start looking around at ways to keep their records pure and intact."

At Harvard, for instance, he sees students taking more "gut" courses -- ones widely known by students to require less work for an easy A. "It’s become more respectable to take such courses," Mr. Mansfield said. "Previously students were sort of embarrassed. ... It’s certainly my impression here that students are working less hard than they used to."

At the same time, however, students are more active in extracurricular activities than ever.

"Life seems to be getting more and more complex for many of them," said Edith O. Kochenour, director of learning-enhancement programs for the University of Utah. "The pressures of having a family, having a job, and going to school are really taking a toll on many students."

Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, said that nearly two-thirds of all college students now hold jobs while enrolled.

"More students are working more hours than ever [in jobs], and as far as I know there are still only 24 hours in a day -- though a lot of students try to stretch that," Mr. Mortenson said.

For instance, Lisa Marie Webb, a freshman at Utah, said she spends more time at her off-campus job as a clerk at ShopKo, where she works about 35 hours a week, than she does on homework, and that she needs the money to pay the bills. She does much of her reading for classes on the bus shuttling between home, school, and work.

Some educators even posit that students today are so accustomed to distraction -- and bombardment with media images -- that they find it harder to concentrate than students in the past.

"It’s a lot of short-attention-span theater," said Chris M. Golde, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. "The next thing that bumps into you captures your imagination."

'Disengagement Compact'

Students do more work for some courses than for others, and a major factor seems to be how much their professors push and inspire them.
Will Imbriale, a sophomore at Boston College, said a philosophy professor he had last year helped him adjust to college work. "I got a D on my first philosophy paper," said Mr. Imbriale, who added that he now studies more than 20 hours per week. "That woke me up, big time."

He said he worked harder for that course than for others, and that he got an A- on his final philosophy paper: "I felt like I earned that. He gave me a sense of achievement. He made me want to understand."

But not every professor pushes students. Mr. Imbriale said that only two out of five of his current professors challenge him.

Mr. Kuh, who directs the student-engagement survey, said that some professors view the time spent grading papers and writing copious notes in the margins of student work as a distraction from their research and other scholarly activities. In turn, some professors have reduced the amount of work they assign.

"There’s an emerging compact between faculty members and students which goes something like, 'If you don’t bother me too much, I won’t bother you too much -- I’ll trade you a B if you trade me some piece of mind,'" said Mr. Kuh, who calls it the "disengagement compact."

Mr. Gardner, of Brevard College, agreed. "I believe today that many of us on the faculty are asking less of students than we were 35 or 40 years ago," he said. "We give them less to read, we give them less to write, we test them less frequently."

The student-engagement survey found that 58 percent of freshmen and 49 percent of seniors reported doing four or fewer papers of 5 to 19 pages in length per academic year. And 52 percent of freshmen and 58 percent of seniors said they are asked to read 10 or fewer books per academic year.

The survey data has left many administrators wondering what should be done, if anything, to encourage students to study more.

Some officials say colleges should try to engage students and persuade them to study in earnest.

One suggestion is to expand study-skills courses like the ones at Utah. The university does not require the courses -- they’re worth three credits -- but officials strongly promote them at freshman orientations.

Mr. Tuckman, of Ohio State University, said he has spent the last five years developing an innovative study-skills course that the university has expanded to 1,000 students in the current academic year (http://all.successcenter.ohio-state.edu/). By getting students to make daily "to-do" lists and to improve their time-management skills, he said, students in his courses have raised their grade-point averages by an average of five-tenths of a point, or half a letter grade.

Mr. Gardner said that colleges should do more to emphasize academics in their brochures, during campus tours, and in freshman-orientation sessions. "The overwhelming emphasis of a lot of that [promotional] literature is, 'If you come here, you’re going to have the time of your life,'" he said. "It’s not very common to have visiting students actually interact with faculty or sit in on classes."

One positive change in recent years, he said, is the emergence of college-orientation programs that require entering students to read a common book and discuss it in organized sessions before classes begin. "I don’t see it as a panacea, but at least it is a way to offer a little bit of balance for the way we present the college experience," he said.

Some student groups, including fraternities and sororities, sponsor regular study halls or require students to study a certain amount. Meanwhile, some universities are asking students to promise to be more studious: Old Dominion University, for example, has set aside one residence hall for freshmen where students sign a contract stating they will study at least 12 hours a week.

Perhaps a more realistic response is to simply lower expectations, so that they more closely comport with campus reality. The 25-hour rule of thumb, it seems, is history.

"The old standard of two hours outside of class for every hour in class was a product of a time in which most in-class time was devoted to lectures and most out-of-class time was spent in reading, memorization of facts/ideas, and writing traditional papers," said Nelson E. Bingham in an e-mail interview. Bingham is a professor of psychology and assistant to the president for enrollment...
management at Earlham College. "It might be time for academe to think about revising the standard."

Even Mr. Imbriale, the Boston College student who toils more than the average on his homework, said that the standard assumes "kind of an ideal world where each student is going to spend very little time socializing and very little time watching TV."

"The distractions of college kind of drag you away from what you should be doing if it was an ideal world."

**KICKING THE STUDY HABIT**

Most college freshmen say they spent five or fewer hours studying per week as high-school seniors -- and the share who spent more time than that studying has diminished in recent years.

Number of hours per week high-school seniors spent studying, 2001

Proportion of high-school seniors who studied six or more hours per week, selected years

College students spent more time studying than they did in high school, but they still studied far fewer hours than recommended, and the proportion who studied 11 or more hours per week has declined in the past two years.

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<th>Number of hours per week spend preparing for class,*</th>
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<td>Proportion of first-year students</td>
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<td>More than 30</td>
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Proportion of college seniors who spent the following number of hours preparing for class* per week

Note: Figures are rounded * Defined in the survey as studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to academic programs.


**6 WAYS FOR COLLEGES TO FOSTER GOOD STUDY HABITS**

Researchers recommend the following steps for encouraging more or better studying by students:

- Require students to take study-skills courses or to attend orientation sessions that emphasize time management.
- Involve faculty members in campus tours for prospective freshmen, to emphasize the importance of academics.
• Better reward faculty members for teaching and spending time with undergraduates.
• Provide more financial aid or otherwise encourage students to work fewer hours in jobs, to allow more time for studies.
• Create "learning communities," in which students are placed in groups of about 25 and share a set of classes to build a better sense of connection to the university and to academic work.
• Take steps to halt grade inflation.

SOURCE: Chronicle reporting


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