

“Time” in the First Year of College

Events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order in the continuous thread of revelation.

Eudora Welty

In their first years in college, 2003-2004, in their many voices, students participating in the FuturePaths research project echoed Benjamin Franklin’s observation that time is “the stuff life is made of.” In the project diaries and interviews students worried, however, that they hadn’t the time to live, lacked the time to learn, and missed the time to do things they loved. Franklin urged his readers not to squander time if they loved life, but college students find that, although they love life, time is not theirs to spend or squander. Instead, it must be governed, managed, harvested, and tightly scheduled. Indeed, the most consistent theme we heard from students in the interviews, the diaries, and the surveys in the first year of the study way back then in the fall of 2003, was how time seemed to have changed: it just was not as it used to be in high school. Speaking for many, one first year student explained,

**To protect the confidentiality of our students, these 'quotes' are amalgams of quotes from numerous students, and are not the actual words of any single student.*

Being able to manage time is something that most people think that they are capable of doing: in high school anyway. That is what helped get us into college in the first place, right? I mean we had to be able to manage our time somenbat so that we would be able to get good grades, participate in extra-curricular activities and still have time to do other amazing feats to make our applications look good. But, managing time reaches an entirely new level in college.

For sure! If we look at how college students report their use of time, most studies find that students report working more than 24 hours per day! From what our FuturePaths students told us in the first year (2003-2004) survey, we calculated that on average they spent:

- 16-20 hours a week in classes
- 6-10 hours a week studying alone, (8% students spent more than 20 hours a week studying alone)
- 4-5 hours studying with others, (5% of the students spent more than 15 hours studying with others).

Use of Time 2003 to 2004

Somehow a lot of the time could not be accounted for, which is not really all that surprising. Yet students felt that they had no time left. The table below shows the results of the first FuturePaths survey, academic year 2003 – 2004.

Use of Time 2003-2004							
Activity (hours per week)	All	Women	Men	MIT	Olin	Smith	UMass
Studying & attending class	31.9	31.8	29.6	32.2	34.4	30.8	27.2
Class projects	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.3	6.5	3.4	2.4
Organized activities, clubs, etc	5.3	5.5	5.0	5.5	13.2	4.7	2.7
Athletic activities, exercise	11.0	10.8	11.3	12.4	9.3	9.8	10.8
Socializing with friends	12.5	12.7	12.2	12.5	12.8	12.1	13.1
Leisure time alone	7.8	7.5	8.2	8.0	5.9	7.8	8.1
Paid work	4.0	4.5	3.2	3.6	1.4	5.0	4.5

In all this variation, we noticed that students across the four schools spent relatively similar amounts of time socializing with friends. Olin students were more likely to be spending time on class projects and organized activities and less likely to spend time on paid work than the students at the other schools.

Use of Time – comparison with other schools and different decades

What are we to make of the use of time by the FuturePaths participants? Are these study participants outliers or conventional? We decided to look at what college students had reported about their use of time at two other schools in Massachusetts and in other decades.

Here is what we found.

Use of Time				
Mean hours per week spent:	FuturePaths 2003-2004	Harvard College Freshman 1987	Wellesley College 1984	Wellesley College 1944
In class and studying	31.00	43.8 females 45.75 males	40.0	46.4
Organized activities, clubs, etc.	5.3	2.15 females 5.15 males	4.0	2.3 (Plus 2.7 in war work)
Athletic activities, exercise	11.00	0.35 females 2.4 males	No data	6.5
Socializing with friends	12.5	30.65 females 37.25 males	10.0+	22.4 (includes leisure alone)
Leisure time alone	7.8	11.0 females 6.6 males	5.0-9.0	(Included with socializing with friends)

Also not surprising, our FuturePaths students reported spending many hours with their computers, an activity that had not been reported in the earlier studies of college students. It is likely that the difference in the amount of time devoted to class work and studying by FuturePaths students in 2003-2004 and Harvard freshman in 1984 was allocated by FuturePaths students to academic work on the computer. The variation in time doing academic work on computers was well distributed across our 737 respondents in 2003-2004. Once we move beyond email and surfing, few students spend much time on games, configuring computers, creating web pages or blogs, or in chat rooms. In future analyses, we will see how these vary by gender and by schools.

Computer Use 2003 – 2004						
Computer activity	< 3 hours week	3-5 hours week	6-10 hours week	11-15 hours week	16-25 hours week	>25 hours week
Academic work	20.1%	26.2%	27.3%	13.4%	7.4%	5.7%
Email	29.6%	28.1%	17.9%	8.5%	8.0%	7.9%
Surfing the web	41.0%	28.2%	15.7%	5.6%	3.8%	4.7%
Games	79.1%	10.6%	5.8%	1.9%	1.2%	1.4%
Configuring computers	89.6%	4.9%	3.4%	0.8%	0.3%	1.1%
Creating web pages, blogs	91.5%	4.7%	1.6%	0.9%	1.3%	0.7%
Chat rooms	96.6%	3.1%	1.2%	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%

Our diary correspondents and interviewees told us the secrets of making it all work – although they usually felt like time was not working for them:

“One big thing I need to work on is time management; learning to discipline myself to get the ball rolling and start my work in a timely manner, as well as learning where all my time escapes to, and trying to eliminate unnecessary time sinks.”

“One interesting thing to do is to write down what you actually did in what hours. You find that these random things you never thought of coming up, like baseball championships, or going to concerts, or simply sleeping late sometimes, all add up to lost hours you expected to have.”

“I know how to manage my time; I do that a lot. I’ll sit and plan out time schedules and what I have to do and when, and when I have free time and have time for fun too. I can do that. I just can’t follow it. Every time my plan is not followed...”

“Even though I don’t like working during the weekend, I’ve realized that you have two choices. You either work on the weekends or you stay up really late during the weeknights to make up for it. I’ve already found out that late nights do not work because I fall asleep during my classes, then I have to spend extra time trying to learn the stuff I missed because I was sleeping.”

“Something I’ve learned about college is – academics, sleep, social life: pick any two but not three.”

“I felt a little unaccustomed to the idea of not having to do every assignment for the next day, as was the case in high school. It took me a while to realize that I would have to devote more time to homework on some days when I had fewer classes and less on other days. Prioritization and planning are the key. Planning out blocks of time for each assignment so that I can work realistically is going to be an especially important skill.”

But as hard as students try, things don’t work out so well. They felt overwhelmed that first year.

“If I was better at time management life would be so great!”

“Every time my plan is not followed.”

“I goof off doing nothing and end up not getting my work done.”

“I believe that over all my years of schooling, I have been conditioned to fall asleep while doing things related to learning.”

Four years later, is life different? C.S.Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, wrote that “future is something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes per hour, whatever he does, whoever he is.” The time passes at the same speed. But are our FuturePaths participants moving at the same hectic speed they were in 2003-2004?

We turn to that question in the next installment. Stay tuned!