

Student Notebook: Taking Time to Connect Amid a Pandemic

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The pressure to focus on academics and secure a job has mounted to a point current undergraduate and graduate students could never have anticipated before COVID-19. The pandemic has dampened the job market and hindered productivity, social wellness, and work-life balance across the board. Financial experts estimate that it may take over a decade for unemployment rates to return to pre-COVID levels, suggesting that this shift has significant implications not only for students' short-term job outlooks but for their long-term financial stability and life plans (Egan, 2020).

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Last year, through a study of undergraduate students' experiences during the pandemic at Arizona State University, Aucego and colleagues found that 13% of students reported delaying their graduation; 40% had lost a job, internship, or job offer; and 29% thought their future earning potential had declined due to the pandemic. In addition, the researchers found that while some students reported a dramatic increase in the time they spent studying, which could reduce the time available for other priorities, others spent significantly less time cracking the books, which could set them up for greater stress down the road.

Although this range of experiences illustrates how students are struggling to balance work and life satisfaction during these unprecedented times, the challenge of balancing our social lives with a heavy workload is a familiar one. The competitiveness of the modern job market—in which a master’s degree can often seem to be the new bachelor’s degree—has already led many students to put social activities and family events on hold. During the fall of 2019, I remember comforting a peer who, after the passing of his grandmother, was confronted with the question of whether to fly home to attend her funeral in the middle of the semester or to remain on campus to avoid falling behind at school. This story is unfortunately a familiar depiction of the constant pressures that students place on themselves to “keep up” with their peers—and research suggests that this may not be the path to the most fulfilling life.

In 2009, Gröpel and Kuhl studied two samples of students and employees. The researchers concluded that the relationship between well-being and work-life balance was mediated by individuals’ ability to fulfill their needs in both their personal and professional lives. This serves as an important reminder to all students that a lack of a work-life balance, emphasis on “life,” can negatively impact well-being. The physical and emotional consequences of low life satisfaction, including fatigue, anxiety, and depression, can bleed into our professional lives too, reducing productivity and further chipping away at work-life balance (Arntén, 2008).

One of the most ambitious longitudinal studies on life satisfaction is the Glueck Study, which later combined with the Grant Study and became otherwise known as the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Started in 1938, this study began with a sample of 268 male sophomores at Harvard. Upon incorporating the Grant Study, the total sample size grew to 724 males, including men who grew up in lower-income neighborhoods in Boston. Researchers concluded that the answer to a healthy, happy life is quality, close relationships. It becomes apparent that the role of family and friends in our lives is just as important, if not more so, than the role of work. So how can we improve in this area during a pandemic, a situation that places strict limits on our ability to pursue social engagement and career development in person?

It comes down to setting a routine, a common strategy in regard to everything from working out to studying or forming new social habits. Many people enjoy the spontaneity of spending time with others, but proactivity has become essential to maintaining a social life during the COVID-19 pandemic. To that end, I suggest incorporating socially distanced dinners, study sessions, and even movie nights with your loved ones into your schedule, and putting them on your calendar as if they were as important as a job interview—because they are. Even if you do not have specific plans with a specific person, allotting time for yourself and others can make a real difference.

Career-wise, despite a multitude of obstacles, networking is not impossible. LinkedIn is a valuable resource that often goes underused by undergraduates. One of the greatest benefits is the ability to chat with a valuable connection that you otherwise would never have met in person. A study by Hoyer and colleagues (2009) suggests that quality is more important than quantity when it comes to job search behaviors. To boost the number of job offers you receive, it is helpful to have fewer connections that are in higher places (as opposed to many connections in lower positions). It is important to note that to have connections in lower positions does not mean they are powerless in influencing your career, and it is possible to connect to those further up the chain of command through them. This is encouraging news, since streamlined networking tools found online remain available for students, and many companies are becoming increasingly open to using them throughout the job interview process.

As can be seen through scientific research and intuitive advice commonly shared through word of mouth, being intentional in our social engagements, whether personal or work-related, is an important step toward work-life balance. Within your career, do not be discouraged if it takes time to find opportunities or if it feels like rejection is the only outcome. One excellent piece of common advice is that you should want to work for a company that is happy to hire you, as this displays a proper match. Think of it as parallel to the development of romantic and friendly relationships: the best connections result from a mutual desire for togetherness. Taken together, all of this can contribute to greater dedication and passion for all aspects of your personal and professional life.

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