Stress among working college students
Case Study: Faculty of Engineering Sibiu, Romania

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ABSTRACT

Working students face many challenges: they must balance work, school, extracurricular activities, and personal life. Several studies reflected the fact that this balancing act goes hand-in-hand with the level of stress. The scope of the study was to find out whether working students in the Faculty of Engineering Sibiu experience different levels of stress compared with the non-working students. Eighty students from the third year of studies were interviewed regarding the research topic. The interviewed students were randomly selected, five working and five non-working students from each of the eight faculty specializations. The results of the study reflect the fact that the management of the faculty and the professors themselves must take into consideration that stress is a factor that affects students’ performance and behavior.

Keywords: working students, stress, faculty management.

INTRODUCTION

The word “stress” is one of the most commonly used words nowadays. It is defined as a force applied to distort the body, accompanied by physical, psychological, or social complaints or dysfunctions. Work-related stress can come from any kind of situation - work content, work organization, work environment, lack of communication, etc. - and it differs from person to person. Although in the short-term, some mental pressure increases people’s creativity and their job performance, having a positive impact on the level of job satisfaction, there is a widespread acceptance that in the long-term, too much stress, without having the chance to recover from stressful situations, represents a significant burden with effects on people’s health.

Research on student stress dates back to the last century, to David Mechanic’s 1962 book Students under Stress. A Study in the Social Psychology of Adaptation. The study investigated the reaction of 20 graduate students taking departmental written examinations by examining responses to stress and techniques of adaptation. Since then, psychological stress among college students has received a lot of attention. Most of the studies performed by different universities focus on identifying types of stress experiences by different subgroups of students (e.g. according to the field of study, first-year students, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation and holding a job while going to school). In addition to sources and experiences of stress, other studies focus on college students’ strategies for coping with
stress. Working students face many challenges: they must balance work, school, extracurricular activities, and personal life. Several studies reflected the fact that this balancing act goes hand-in-hand with the level of stress. In addition to offering financial independence and satisfaction, a job provides both training and experience and helps students develop time-management and confidence skills. Working teaches students about responsibility and can reinforce what they are learning in school. On the other hand, experts agree that students who work more than 15 to 20 hours per week often experience decreased academic performance, which can lead to dropping out of school entirely. Working long hours can also limit opportunities to build friendships and explore interests that enhance intellectual and emotional development.

**SCOPE OF WORK**

The scope of the study was to find out whether working students in the Faculty of Engineering Sibiu experienced different levels of stress compared with the non-working students. The idea for such a research topic originated from previous informal discussions between the researchers and different groups of students, which revealed the fact that some working students fail to meet both educational and professional goals, while other working students manage to combine the two programs. The researchers were particularly looking for answers to the following questions:

- Do non-working students academically perform better than working students?
- Do working students consider different school practices as being more stressful than non-working students?
- Do working students experience stress differently than non-working students?
- What are the relaxing activities performed by students to reduce stress?

The results of the study were useful for the management of the faculty in adjusting the educational offerings and coming up with extra educational services.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

Eighty students from the third year of Faculty of Engineering Sibiu\(^1\) were interviewed regarding the research topic. The interviewed students were randomly selected, 5 working and 5 non-working students from each of the eight faculty specializations. Faculty of Engineering in Sibiu is facing an increasing demand from industrial companies to employ students not only by the time of graduation but even during university studies. The students are either being offered an unsolicited job or they themselves are seeking a job in order to get the necessary “work experience” further needed in the recruitment process in an industrial company. The decision to select students from the third year of studies came from the fact that the third year was, by the time of the study, the year with the highest proportion of employed students (conclusion based on observations of students’ lecture attendance and discussions with the professors, although the proportion of employed students in the second and first year of studies has been increasing in recent years).

Fifty percent of the respondents had a job at the time of the interview, while 50% did not have a job. The reasons the students stated they decided to take a job were financial independence (52.5%), getting professional experience (40.0%), or taking advantage of an opportunity (7.5%). Of the interviewed students, 42.5% had a job in a field related to the specialization they were attending in the university. The average monthly disposable income was 1167 lei in the case of working students and 778 lei in the case of non-working students.

Half of the interviewed students were males and half were females. Regarding the residence, 38.8% of the students live together with their parents, 31.2% live in rented apartments, 22.5% live in students’ dormitories, while 7.5% live in their own apartment. Students’ financial resources consist

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\(^1\) Faculty of Engineering Sibiu is offering four-year programs of bachelor studies (8 semesters), followed by two-year master programs.
of regular salary (50% of students), parents’ financial support (40%), scholarship (17.5%), and other non-regular sources of income like daily jobs, remittances, etc. (23.8%).

The data were collected by the means of a self-administrated structured questionnaire, in March 2016 - at the beginning of the spring term and after students’ winter exam session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Academic performance of working students vs non-working students

Academic performance of students enrolled at Faculty of Engineering was measured by two indicators: the average exams grade of the last session - February 2016 (Figure 1)\(^2\) and current number of exams still to pass (Figure 2)\(^3\). The two metrics were reported by the respondents and cross-checked by the research team with official faculty records.

Two conclusions can be drawn regarding academic performance of non-working students in comparison with working students:

- in terms of extreme performances (high performances / low performances), non-working students perform better than working students:
  - 11% of non-working students have very high grades vs only 3.7% of working students;
  - 45% of non-working students have passed all exams vs 26.5% of working students;
  - the proportion of students with low performances is higher in the group of working students (33.8% of them have average grades lower than 7.00 and 27.7% of them still have more than 4 past exams to pass, with 7.5% having even more then 10 past exams to pass) compared with a lower proportion in the group of non-working students (10.0% of them have the average grade below 7.00 and 7.0% of them still have more than 4 past exams to pass);

- in terms of medium performances (average grade between 7.00-8.99, number of current failed exams between 1-3), the difference between non-working and working students is not so evident.

![Figure 1: What is the average grade of your last session?](image)

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\(^2\) Faculty of Engineering Sibiu holds two ordinary sessions of exams each year: in February (end the fall semester) and in June (end the spring semester). The students are required to accumulate a certain number of credits by the end of each academic year (each exam being assigned a fixed number of credits). Within the session month, the students can undertake exams in each of the subjects taught during the current semester and in subjects not passed in the previous semesters (years) of study.

\(^3\) According to the Romanian grading system, 10 is the maximum grade and 5 is the minimum necessary in order to pass an exam.
The students’ inner motivation plays an important role in fulfilling both school and job requirements. Surprisingly, when asked for any specific reason that would make them give up university studies, 65.7% of working students answered “No reason”, while only 34.3% of non-working students had the same answer.

**School sources of stress: working students vs. non-working students**

School requirements put more stress on working students compared with non-working students. Compulsory lecture attendance (average 3.95 / 5.00), school tasks (average 4.10 / 5.00) and exam session periods (average 4.13 / 5.00) are generally considered very stressful school requirements/situations, especially for working students.

The students were asked to mention one very stressful situation that they had to pass through during the last year. Examples of students’ answers are:
- “I faced health problems and I had to continue going both to school and to job,”
- “a failed exam from the second year of studies, which I could not repeatedly pass,”
- “a project conducted in cooperation with a company,”
- “decision I had to take with implications in the long term,”
- “when I returned from an Erasmus exchange program and I had to pass my local university exams, too,”
- “managing both the job schedule and the university lectures,”
- “the exam session.”

**Symptoms of stress among working students vs. non-working students**

The students were asked to mention which of the following stress symptoms they experienced over the last three months: tendency to quarrel for any reason, difficulties in decision-making, decisions taken in a hurry, difficulties in focusing, state of continual concern, increased alcohol or cigarette consumption, insomnia, continued working at home, loss of appetite or overeating, restlessness and worries.

Working students feel more stressed compared with non-working students (Figure 4). Stress symptoms such as loss of appetite or overeating, difficulties in focusing, difficulties in taking decisions, or feelings of restlessness and worries are mentioned by more than 50% of working students. The proportion is lower in the case of non-working students (around 30-35%, with the exception of loss of appetite / overeating that might be caused by the exam session period).

![Figure 4: Which of the following situations did you experience over the last three months?](image)

**Relaxing activities performed by students to reduce stress**

The students were asked to identify the activities they do when feeling stressed. A very high percentage of students said that they prefer to spend time with family and friends (85% of working students and 87.5% of non-working students) or they simply like to stay and relax at home (77% of working students and 70% of non-working students). A smaller but still significant proportion of students prefer sport and open-air activities: respectively, 35% and 40% of working students, and 45% and 22.5% of non-working students. Volunteering was not a common activity for either group.
Figure 5: Which of the following activities do you undertake when feeling stressed?

CONCLUSIONS

With the help of family and friends, many working students are able to keep their stress levels relatively under control. Identifying students' interests and goals is an important part of helping them successfully pass through college. At the same time, the management of the faculty and the professors themselves must take into consideration that stress is a factor that affects students’ performance and behavior. Student support programs for reducing stress among the group of working students must be developed as well.

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