

When the Worlds of Work and School Collide

Colin Taylor, a UNCW senior who serves at Bluewater Grill, stands next to Paula Dutille, a middle-aged host manager, at the stand near the entrance of the restaurant. He just finished giving his one table of four people their bills. He pulls out a stack of 15 index cards and begins to read each one, front and back.

“What are you studying?” Dutille asked. Dutille is a first grade teacher who manages the hosts at Bluewater Grille as a second job.

“I have my biggest finance exam of the semester tomorrow! I have to cram in some studying whenever I get the chance since I won’t be home until after eleven tonight,” said Taylor. Taylor works 20 to 25 hours a week at Bluewater Grill to pay his expenses, including bills, groceries, gas and going out with his friends.

As the job market competition increases, students have to focus more on their academics. Students can no longer afford to turn in a research paper without proofreading it for grammar errors nor can they skip daily homework no matter how insignificant the points are to their final grade. At the same time, college tuition, food and gas prices and the general cost of living are increasing.

At UNCW, for instance, the cost of in-state tuition has gone up from \$1,928.00 in 2005-06 to \$2,459.00 in 2008-09. College students who have never worked before now have to find jobs on and off campus, and students who have always had a job are having to work more hours in order to continue at their standard of living, according to “Learning and Earning: Working in College,” a 2001 study done by Jonathan M. Orszag and his colleagues at Upromise, Inc.

In order for students to complete their school work and working the hours they need to, more students now do homework while on the clock. Every host at Bluewater Grill who goes to college at UNCW or Cape Fear Community College does homework at work.

At orientation, incoming freshman at universities, including UNCW, are told that, on average, for every one hour spent in class, two hours should be spent doing homework and studying outside of class. And, the majority of students find this estimate to be true.

“In order for me to just keep up with daily lectures, I have to read the chapters in the textbook and the assigned online reading. That takes at least two hours for each class,” said UNCW junior, Allison Lawlor. Lawlor is a Communication Studies major and

Sociology minor who works at least 10 hours a week in the UNCW graduate school office.

Lawlor reads the assigned homework the day before the class discussion. She attends two to three classes every day, which means she does homework for four to six hours a day. This time frame does not even include the projects and papers her professors assign.

Lawlor is currently taking a class on communication research methods, most of which involves group projects outside of class. She and her group members spend five hours at a time at the library investigating and researching communication topics such as the nonverbal communication of tattoos and the ways homosexuals “come out” to their families. On these days, Lawlor does not have enough spare time to complete her assigned readings. She takes a textbook to work and keeps it open at her work station. She reads at every chance she gets, even if it’s only for one minute.

“Every minute of reading I get done at work is significant. That means one less minute of reading I have to do after,” said Lawlor.

In the year 2001, the number of college students aged 16 to 24 who had a full- or part-time job was 57%, according to Orszag’s study. This percentage increased since 1984 when the number of college students who held a job was only 49%.

The reason more college students are working is because the cost of living is rising. Gas prices are around \$3 a gallon; groceries cost nearly \$100 a week. Even the price of attending college is increasing. The estimated cost of attendance for an undergraduate in-state student at UNCW who lives on campus for the 2009-2010 school year is \$16,100. This is over \$1000 more than the estimated cost of the 2008-2009 school year which was projected as \$15,251.

Working 25 hours a week isn’t even enough to pay for such expense, especially since, on average, college students earn roughly \$7.50 per hour, according to Orszag’s study. Most of the students who work also receive financial aid in the form of grants or loans. Taylor receives \$5,000 a semester through grants from the North Carolina Education Lottery and loans from the Direct Loan Program, which is a Federal Student Aid programs offered by the Department of Education. This adds up to only \$10,000 a year.

Most college students work at low-paying job positions at restaurants, grocery stores, retail stores and on campus locations. School may be the number one priority, but they still cannot afford to cut hours to study for exams.

Because of the time limitation, college students bring textbooks, flashcards and homework assignments to their job locations to complete when they are not busy.

"I see employees doing homework at least three times a week," said Dutille. Dutille only works four shifts a week with college students. The rest of the times she is either in the office or at home doing paper work or making next week's schedule.

Hosts at restaurants read chapters in a textbook when not seating customers or cleaning the restaurant. Servers stand next to the drink machine, out of view of the customers, and study flashcards. Cashiers complete homework when no one is buying anything or when the customers are browsing. It does not matter where college students work; they all cram in minutes of schoolwork whenever possible.

"I am a host, and when no one comes in, I just stand around. It is the perfect time to whip out my chemistry flashcards and study," said UNCW junior, Rachel Sturges. Sturges is a chemistry major who hosts at Outback Steakhouse four days a week.

Sturges, like other student workers, do schoolwork when there are a limited number of customers. Instead of standing at the host stand, staring, waiting for the next customer to walk in, Sturges takes advantage of the down time by studying for upcoming tests, reading chapters in her textbook or reviewing recent and upcoming lab procedures.

Students also do homework when they have down time. After Taylor finishes his morning duties, which range from cutting lemons to providing the wait station with ice, he sits down at an empty table in a dining room and he reads his finance textbook. Sometimes, with his calculator next to him, he works out homework problems. As he does so, he keeps an eye on his assigned section of tables and waits for his first customers.

"Most servers [at Bluewater Grill] do homework when they have down time. It is common for workers to bring homework in to do while waiting for their first tables to arrive or when none of their tables need anything," said Taylor.

Student workers do homework the most during their lunch, dinner or cigarette breaks. Jason Schaaf is a junior at UNCW majoring in Communication Studies. He also is an employee at Dick's Sporting Goods 18 to 20 hours a week. During his fifteen-minute breaks, when he is not assisting customers in the store, he is sitting at a table in the break room reading his Communication textbook or going over key terms for an upcoming test.

"A lot of the employees do homework on their breaks. Some even do it out on the floor. When no one is around to help, they just pull out their flashcards and study," said Schaaf.

Most of the time, doing homework while at work does not affect the student's job performance because the students do homework only when appropriate, not when their places of employment are busy and their assistance is needed. When Dick's is flooded with customers, Schaaf shifts all of his focus from school to the customers and making sure they find exactly what they are looking for.

"Everyone at Dick's knows not to do schoolwork when a lot of people are in the store. I mean, we get paid to work, not do homework," said Schaaf.

Most employees do not mind coworkers doing homework, and most managers allow the students to do schoolwork while on the clock, as long as it does not interfere with work duties and the students do not get too distracted from what is going on around them. When Dutille sees a host reading and highlighting a textbook, she does not care. In fact, she feels bad for the host.

"I know how hard college is, I have been through it myself. My personal feeling is that school should be the students' number one priority. Working in the restaurant business is not their future; it is what gets them through school. Doing homework on the clock is okay as long as it does not interfere with work," said Dutille.

When students are not busy with work duties or homework, they are complaining about the project due or the huge exam they have the following morning.

"I hear at least two servers a day complain about workload. Usually they complain or beg to be the first server to leave because they have something due the next day," said Taylor.

The burden on the students grows when they have to give up work in order to complete a project or study for an exam. Schaaf wrote a note to his managers a month earlier requesting off April 3-5 in order to study for an exam he has in early April. Three whole days he will not work because he has to study seven chapters on communication research methods.

Bluewater Grill receives at least two phone calls a day by employees calling in because, even though they need the money, they cannot afford to lose the time for schoolwork.

“Half of the notes I receive from hosts requesting off are due to schoolwork. Every week at least two employees call in because they have too much homework,” said Dutille.

Even by combining the demands of college and work, students barely have time to take care of themselves. Taylor exercised and played basketball every day in high school. Now the only exercise he gets is walking to and from class and a game of basketball once a week at the campus recreation center. The only way he makes time to run errands, such as buying groceries, is by reading at work.

“School and work is 80% of my life. The only way I make time for other simple needs is by bringing my textbook to work and reading a few pages when I have down time. Those few pages really make a difference,” said Taylor.