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AN ASSESSMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE WORK ETHIC REGARDING EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript conducts a study of student work ethic and provides a comparison between the employment work ethic and academic work ethic of undergraduates. Findings suggest that while overall work ethic for both academics and employment can be considered “high,” the concept of doing more than is required in academics is not highly valued by students. Unexpectedly, it was found that males and females exhibit significantly different work ethics regarding academics. Females, more than males, have a level of work ethic toward academics that is very similar to their work ethic toward employment.

INTRODUCTION

Working with undergraduate students can be both rewarding and frustrating. With some exceptions, undergraduate students often appear to pursue a minimalist route in their quest for graduation. Faculty can be baffled by a student’s lack of motivation or concern regarding learning and later just as baffled when employers speak highly of that former student. Many of those students who choose to “get-by” academically appear to have a very different perspective regarding work. They throw themselves into their jobs in a way that leaves employers proud and professors puzzled. If students do not perceive a direct link between academic accomplishment and career success then it is likely that their prioritization of academic activities will differ greatly from their prioritization of direct employment or career related activities.

THE CURRENT GENERATION OF STUDENTS

Researchers and marketers have long labeled successive generations of young adults. While generation labeling tends to be arbitrary it does provide some degree of behavior or attitude profiling of a specific segment of society (e.g. Ceng 1999; Donaton 1993; Kapner 1997; Neuborne and Kerwin 1999; Ritchie 1995; Stapinski 1999; Wellner 1999; Wolburg and Pokrywczynski 2001). Regardless of the variety of labels and descriptions applied, analysts typically note shifts or swings in general attitudes and values of each youth generation (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski 2001). It can be argued that each generation evolves during a different period in history and thus develops a different set of coping skills and expectations from earlier generations. For Baby Boomers, being a young, single adult was a brief transition period spent earning an education or doing military service. Alternately, today's youth are likely to remain single throughout their 20s and early 30s, delaying the onset of parenting and in many ways placing a different importance on family life (Ritchie 1995; Wolburg and Pokrywczynski 2001).

Within this generational context, evidence suggests that many students pursuing an undergraduate degree perceive a distinct difference between an “education” and a “degree” and subsequently value each differently (e.g. Rau and Durand 2000). This is supported by research indicating that on average, university students perceive little or no correlation between college academic performance (grade point average) and future material success (Eskilson and Wiley 1999; Rau and Durand 2000). As a result, students may not consider an “education” as particularly relevant or important but rather view the “degree” as the certificate needed for future employment. This suggests a significant and serious difference in perceptions between faculty and students in regards to the importance of education in the life of the individual.

The Perception of Higher Education

One longitudinal study shows that the individual goals rated most highly by students are:

- 1) to have a warm caring relationship with another adult
- 2) to acquire mastery of skills for their occupation
- 3) to have a secure financial future
- 4) to have a comfortable relationship with their family
- 5) to be physically fit (Eskilson and Wiley 1999).

In this same study, academic performance did not impact the student’s perception of their ability to meet expectations of attaining a secure financial future, high income, or a high level of skills (Eskilson and Wiley 1999).

In most cases, we cannot entirely blame the current generation of undergraduate students for these attitudes. For their entire life they have attended an educational process they can easily take for granted. A high school diploma was once considered a unique mark of achievement, attainable only by those who combined their innate abilities with hard work and perseverance (Adrian and Palmer 1999). Now, a high school diploma or its General Educational Equivalency (GED), are viewed much more as an expected commodity. If “everyone” gets one, then getting yours becomes a matter of “doing time” rather than a result of achievement. This perception of education may be carrying over to the university environment. To an ever greater degree we find undergraduate students whose education is funded by someone else (usually parents) and we find a student attitude geared more toward the “degree” rather than the “education” (Adrian and Palmer 1999). As a result, the college degree is seen more as an entitlement, reducing the perceived value of the educational process. For many students, getting a college degree is seen as a “certificate program” - you put in your time and get your “ticket punched.” Getting the degree is paramount and individual learning is a secondary concern.

A Matter of Priority

It should be remembered that in most cases the “raw materials” that universities start with are

in no way defective (Arnold 1994). With few exceptions, the high school GPA and SAT scores of incoming students suggest they can handle the academic rigors expected by most undergraduate programs. In a study by Farrell and Mudrack (1992) it was found that non-traditional students usually exhibit higher academic involvement than traditional students. Non-traditional students were also shown to have a greater internal locus of control, need for achievement, and stronger work ethic. Based upon these and other similar findings (e.g. Knox, et. al., 1992; Rau and Durand 2000), this manuscript attempts to examine issues of student work ethic. Specifically, this is an attempt to determine if there is a difference between student work ethic in regards to their academics versus their perception of employment. It is noted that many employers view “work ethic” as the primary key to employee and organizational success (Coplin 2005, Massie 2004).

A MEASURE OF WORK ETHIC AND PRIORITIES

It is known that students typically attend college with the intention of gaining greater career and financial success later in life (e.g. Kimweli and Richards 1999). However, it may be the case that undergraduate students do not see the potential contribution of academic learning to their future success (e.g. Knox, et. al., 1992). It is possible that much of a student’s academic effort is shaped by that student’s perception of college and academics (Rau and Durand 2000), much as their career success is shaped by that person’s perception of work, career, and work ethic. The potential for differing perceptions of work ethic regarding academics and employment leads to the following two hypotheses:

- H₁:** Students have a different work ethic regarding their perceptions of “employment” and “academics.”
- H₂:** Students exhibit a stronger work ethic for what they consider “employment” than for what they consider “academics.”

METHODOLOGY

To determine congruence/incongruence between student attitudes regarding employment and academics, the Survey of Work Values (SWV) designed by Woolack, Goodale, Wijting and Smith (Wollack, et. al., 1971) was modified for this analysis. These measures are based on a broad interpretation of the construct commonly referred to as the Protestant Work Ethic. The SWV consists of six sub-scales, each designed to measure a separate value dimension. These are: 1) Pride in Work; 2) Job Involvement; 3) Activity Preference; 4) Attitude Toward Earnings; 5) Social Status of the Job; and, 6) Upward Striving. The first three factors are classified as intrinsic, the second two as extrinsic and the final as a mixture of both.

Measurement items taken from the SWV were based on their transferability to the educational environment. To gather a sample, 25 course sections at a small (approximately 4500 students) state funded University in the mid-Atlantic region were randomly selected and the faculty were asked of their willingness to participate. Of those sections selected, over 95% of the faculty

agreed to participate (24 sections). Two independent sets of surveys were given, one to a sample of students measuring their work ethic toward employment and the other to a second sample of students measuring their work ethic toward academics. The “employment” survey used items as written for the SWV (Table 2) and the “academic” survey reworded the same items to make them suitable for the undergraduate educational environment (Table 3). Surveys were sent to each faculty member to administer in class. The surveys were passed out in an alternating pattern to ensure a somewhat equal representation of each sub-group across schools, departments, classes, etc. A total of 469 responses were collected, 240 from the Employment Work Ethic sample and 229 from the Academic Work Ethic sample. As with the original SWV, all items were measured on a five point Likert scale. An independent sample comparison of means was used to compare the two models and determine if significant differences exist.

Demographics of the Sample

Of the students reporting demographic information, 51.2% responded to the employment questionnaire while 48.8% responded to the academic questionnaire (Table 1). Ranked by classification, 20.9% were freshmen, 24.5% sophomores, 26.0% juniors and 26.7% seniors. Ranked by degree program, 45.2% were business majors, 12.8% were education majors, and 39.7% were liberal arts majors. By gender, 41.6% of the respondents were male and 57.1% female. By race, 83.8% were white, 7.2% black, 2.6% Hispanic, 2.1% Asian and .2% American Indian. All ratios were consistent between the two samples and the race and gender percentages of the sample closely mirror those of the student population of the institution.

Table 1 – Demographic profile of students (n=469)

	Male	Female	Total
Gender	41.6%	57.1%	98.7%
Classification			
Freshmen	8.1%	12.8%	20.9%
Sophomore	7.5%	17.1%	24.5%
Junior	12.8%	13.2%	26.0%
Senior	13.2%	13.4%	26.7%
By Race			
White	34.8%	48.8%	83.6%
Black	3.0%	4.3%	7.2%
Hispanic	1.1%	1.5%	2.6%
Asian	1.1%	1.1%	2.1%
American Indian	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%
Area of Degree			
Business	25.2%	20.0%	45.2%
Education	1.7%	11.1%	12.8%
Arts and Sciences	14.3%	25.4%	39.7%

Table 2 – Employment Work Ethic

Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev
Pride in Work			
One who does a sloppy job at work should feel a little ashamed of oneself.	220	3.86	.790
A worker should feel some responsibly to do a decent job, whether or not their supervisor is around.	219	4.37	.538
There is nothing wrong with doing a poor job at work of one can get away with it	219	1.81	.702
There is nothing as satisfying as doing the best job possible	219	4.29	.860
One who feels no sense of pride in one's work is probably unhappy	219	3.58	.902
Only a fool worries about doing a job well, since it is important only that you do your job well enough to not get fired	218	1.72	.723
One should feel a sense of pride in one's work	219	4.41	.554
The most important thing about a job is liking the work	218	4.07	.880
Doing a good job should mean as much to a worker as a good paycheck	219	3.75	.890
Job Involvement			
Most companies have suggestion boxes for their workers, but I doubt that the companies take these suggestions seriously	220	2.90	.957
One who has an idea about how to improve one's own job should drop a note in the company suggestion box	219	3.90	.806
Activity Preference			
A job which requires the employee to be busy is better than a job which allows a lot of loafing	219	3.64	.836
If a person can get away with it, that person should try to work just a little less than the boss expects	219	1.98	.745
The best job that a worker can get is one that requires very little work	217	2.09	.806
When an employee can get away with it, the employee should take it easy	219	2.29	.815
A person would soon grow tired of loafing on a job and would probably be happier if he or she worked hard	219	3.74	.784
A person should try to stay busy all day rather than try to find ways to get out of doing work	218	3.78	.744
Attitude Toward Earnings			
A person should choose the job that pays the most	218	2.68	.888
A person should choose one job over another mostly because of the higher wages	218	2.67	.876
The only important part of most jobs is the paycheck	218	2.33	.901
Social Status on the Job			
One of the reasons that I work is to make my family respect me	217	2.70	1.02
Having a good job makes a person more worthy of praise from friends and family	218	3.20	.994
Those who hold down good jobs are respected in society	215	3.93	.736
Upward Striving			
Even if a person has a good job, the person should always be looking for a better job	215	3.00	.857
One should always be thinking about pulling oneself up at work and should work hard with the hope of being promoted to a higher-level job	216	3.97	.748
A promotion to a higher-level job usually means more worries and should be avoided for that reason	215	2.20	.769

Table 3 – Academic Work Ethic

Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Pride in Work			
One who does a sloppy job at school should feel a little ashamed of oneself	207	3.55	.868
A student should feel some responsibly to do decent work, whether or not it is graded	207	3.97	.660
There is nothing wrong with poor performance in class if one can get away with it	207	2.28	.864
There is nothing as satisfying as doing the best you can at school	206	3.86	1.066
One who feels no sense of pride in one's school work is probably unhappy	207	3.18	.946
Only a fool worries about getting A's, since C's are all that's needed to graduate	208	1.98	.876
One should feel a sense of pride in one's work	207	4.32	.605
The most important thing about a class is liking the subject	207	3.37	1.05
Doing good work should mean as much to a student as getting good grades	206	3.74	.807
Job Involvement			
Most colleges have student evaluations of faculty, but I doubt that this college takes these evaluations seriously	208	3.08	1.148
One who has an idea about how to improve one's classes should write their ideas on the faculty evaluation comments	208	4.01	.610
Activity Preference			
An educational curriculum which requires the student to be busy is better than one which allows a lot of loafing	208	3.13	.912
If a person can get away with it, that person should try to work just a little less than their teacher expects	207	2.31	.838
The best class that a student can get is one that requires very little work	208	2.48	.873
When an student can get away with it in their program, the student should take it easy and not work too hard	208	2.48	.839
A person would soon grow tired of loafing at college and would probably be happier if he or she worked hard	208	3.46	.916
A student should try to stay busy all day rather than try to find ways to get out of doing class work	207	3.20	.958
Attitude Toward Earnings			
A student should choose the classes that give the best grades	207	2.71	.877
A student should choose one class section over another mostly because of the opportunity of higher grades	207	3.22	.896
The only important part of college is grades	208	2.23	.886
Social Status on the Job			
One of the reasons that I attend college is to make my family respect me	208	2.70	1.08
Having a college education makes a person more worthy of praise from friends and family	207	3.29	1.04
Those who have a college education are respected in society	206	3.99	.765
Upward Striving			
Even is a student has good grades, the student should always be looking to improve their performance	207	4.06	.666
One should always be thinking about pulling oneself up at college and should work hard with the hope of graduating with honors	206	3.77	.869
Accepting extra work from a teacher means more worries and should be avoided for that reason	207	2.70	.907

RESULTS

Test results reveal a number of significant differences in student perceptions of employment work ethic and academic work ethic. Results suggest that students have a “strong” work ethic for both employment and academics (Tables 2 and 3). However, the independent sample comparison of means reveals a number of significantly different responses. Seven of the 11 items measuring Pride in Work were found to be significantly different at the .05 level (Table 4). Both of the two questions dealing with job involvement were found to be significant and four of the six measures for Activity preference were found to be significantly different. There was no significant difference in Attitude Towards Earnings and Social Status on the Job but all of the variables measuring Upward Striving were found to indicate a significant difference. Based on the number of significant findings and on the direction of the means, we can fail to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that:

- H₁:** Students have a different work ethic regarding their perceptions of “employment” and “academics.”
- H₂:** Students exhibit a stronger work ethic for what they consider “employment” than for what they consider “academics.”

Table 4 - Comparison of Employment and Academic Work Ethic
(paraphrasing of combined statements)

Items	“Employment Mean”	“Academic Mean”	p
Pride in Work			
One who does a sloppy job should feel a little ashamed of oneself.	3.86	3.55	.000
A worker should feel responsibly to do decent work, whether or not it is graded/inspected.	4.37	3.97	.000
There is nothing wrong with poor performance if one can get away with it	1.81	2.28	.001
There is nothing as satisfying as doing the best you can at work/school	4.29	3.86	.034
One who feels no sense of pride in one’s work is probably unhappy	3.58	3.18	.726
Only a fool worries about doing a job well, since it is more than is necessary	1.72	1.98	.653
One should feel a sense of pride in one’s work	4.41	4.32	.968
The most important thing is to like your job/classes	4.07	3.37	.000
Doing a good job should mean as much as getting good pay/grades	3.75	3.74	.205
Job Involvement			
Most institutions have evaluations of superiors, but I doubt that most take them seriously	2.90	3.08	.000
If you have an idea to improve the organization, you should submit that suggestion	3.90	4.01	.001
Activity Preference			
It’s better to have a job/class that keeps you busy as opposed to loafing	3.64	3.13	.477
If you can get away with it, you should work as little as possible	1.98	2.31	.000
The best job/class you can get are the ones that require very little work	2.09	2.48	.000
When you can get away with it, you should take it easy and not work too hard	2.29	2.48	.166
A person would grow tired of loafing at school/work and would be			

Table 4 - Comparison of Employment and Academic Work Ethic
(paraphrasing of combined statements)

Items	“Employment Mean”	“Academic Mean”	p
happier if he/she worked hard	3.74	2.48	.000
A person should try to stay busy rather than finding ways to get out of work/class	3.78	3.20	.000
Attitude Toward Earnings			
A person should choose the jobs/classes that pay the most/give the best grades	2.68	2.71	.896
One should choose the job/section mostly for higher wages/grades	2.67	3.22	.984
The only important part of work/school is pay/grades	2.33	2.23	.362
Social Status on the Job			
The reason I work/attend college is to make my family respect me	2.70	2.70	.163
Having a good job/education makes a person more worthy of praise from friends and family	3.20	3.26	.218
Those with a job/education are respected in society	3.93	3.99	.437
Upward Striving			
Even with good grades/job, one should always be looking to improve	3.00	4.06	.001
One should always be thinking about improving in hope of attaining a higher-level	3.97	3.77	.000
Attempting extra work means more worries and should be avoided	2.20	2.70	.000

Results of the survey were cross-examined based upon demographic information. The sample was divided into two groups based upon perceptions of employment and perceptions of academics. Analysis was run to determine if the groups differed internally based upon age, gender, race, academic classification and employment history. The only truly significant difference was found regarding gender (Table 5). In summary, it was found that females have a significantly stronger work ethic regarding academics than do males. However, regarding employment, there is no significant difference between genders.

Table 5 - Academic Work Ethic, by Gender

Items	Males	Females	p
Pride in Work			
One who does a sloppy job at school should feel a little ashamed of oneself	3.40	3.69	.010
A student should feel some responsibility to do decent work, whether or not it is graded	3.81	4.11	.000
There is nothing wrong with poor performance in class if one can get away with it	2.53	2.08	.000
There is nothing as satisfying as doing the best you can at school	3.65	4.03	.007
One who feels no sense of pride in one's school work is probably unhappy	2.95	3.32	.003
Only a fool worries about getting A's, since C's are all that's needed to graduate	2.13	1.85	.017
One should feel a sense of pride in one's work	4.27	4.35	.314
The most important thing about a class is liking the subject	3.34	3.43	.550
Doing good work should mean as much to a student as getting good grades	3.58	3.88	.004
Job Involvement			
Most colleges have student evaluations of faculty, but I doubt that this college takes these evaluations seriously	3.28	2.89	.009
One who has an idea about how to improve one's classes should write their ideas on the faculty evaluation comments	3.92	4.08	.057

Table 5 - Academic Work Ethic, by Gender

Items	Males	Females	p
Activity Preference			
An educational curriculum which requires the student to be busy is better than one which allows a lot of loafing	3.04	3.21	.172
If a person can get away with it, that person should try to work just a little less than their teacher expects	2.59	2.10	.000
The best class that a student can get is one that requires very little work	2.75	2.27	.000
When an student can get away with it in their program, the student should take it easy and not work too hard	2.71	2.28	.000
A person would soon grow tired of loafing at college and would probably be happier if he or she worked hard	3.28	3.63	.004
A student should try to stay busy all day rather than try to find ways to get out of doing class work	3.00	3.36	.004
Attitude Toward Earnings			
A student should choose the classes that give the best grades	2.98	2.49	.000
A student should choose one class section over another mostly because of the opportunity of higher grades	3.30	3.11	.113
The only important part of college is grades	2.24	2.26	.869
Social Status on the Job			
One of the reasons that I attend college is to make my family respect me	2.76	2.63	.340
Having a college education makes a person more worthy of praise from friends and family	3.42	3.24	.213
Those who have a college education are respected in society	3.99	3.98	.903
Upward Striving			
Even is a student has good grades, the student should always be looking to improve their performance	4.00	4.09	.295
One should always be thinking about pulling oneself up at college and should work hard with the hope of graduating with honors	3.54	3.94	.000
Accepting extra work from a teacher means more worries and should be avoided for that reason	2.84	2.56	.018

DISCUSSION

Even though results suggest a reasonably high level of work ethic for the current generation of undergraduate students, there is a difference in their perception of employment work ethic and academic work ethic. Overall, it appears that student “Pride in Work” is significantly higher for employment than for academics. Conversely, perceptions of “Job Involvement” indicate that students assume a higher level of input toward changes to academia than they assume toward employment. This may be due to their greater experience in the academic environment or because of an “entitlement” expectation in which they perceive themselves as the customer of the university. “Activity Preference” and “Upward Striving” indicated significant results but results were mixed regarding directions.

Gender differences in perceptions of academic work ethic was the most interesting finding. In regards to “Pride in Work,” females appear to consider their academic accomplishments a significantly higher priority than do males. Regarding “Job Involvement,” females are more likely to want to contribute to the educational process and more likely to expect results from their contribution. Likewise, as shown in “Activity Preference,” females are more likely to want to stay

busy and less likely to attempt an “easier path” when compared to males. Females also show to be more “Upward Striving” than males regarding academics.

While preliminary, these unexpected findings may be significant to both educators and employers. It has been noted for some time that girls are outperforming boys in schoolwork (Hupp 2005). The fact that younger females are outperforming males academically may be an indicator that males in our society are learning a different work ethic for academics than for employment. This may bode poorly for undergraduate faculty as it can prove difficult to encourage male students to consider academic learning as a priority. This may also prove an issue for employers, as many view GPA’s as a predictor for job success. It may be that female GPA is a better predictor of their work ethic than are male GPA’s.

Although reasons for the difference between gender perceptions of academics cannot be determined here, it is possible that the greater prioritization of academics by females is evidenced in many ways in our society. Recent demographic shifts show that women are increasingly filling work positions that were once predominately male. Census data indicates a trend in which more women are attaining bachelor and master degrees than are men and that women tend to maintain higher GPAs in college than men (Census 2000). Findings of this manuscript may provide support in explaining this trend. Females are currently showing a higher rate of success in their academic endeavors due to the fact that they are placing a higher prioritization on academics than are their male counterparts.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are limitations to this study, most notably the use of a single institution and single sample. The university studied was a women’s college until 1978, at which time it became co-educational. Gender differences found in this study may be a residual of the public’s attitude toward the institution. It is possible that more “academically oriented” females consider this university as their “first choice” as compared to their male counterparts. It is also possible that, for traditional students with limited work experience, they may not yet have formed their own true work ethic. While they certainly have beliefs regarding what they consider to be an appropriate work ethic it is possible that this is a reflection of social expectations as opposed to their unique individual views. Future research should likely include a larger sample of students from a number of universities and should attempt to search more deeply into work ethics based upon employment experience.

In addition, this study was initially designed to be a simple experiment in student perceptions. The unexpected findings of gender-based differences should be examined further in a more methodical fashion. Future research may also focus on the influence of “employment” and “academic” work ethic on student grades. It is quite possible that those students who perform better academically will have a lower degree of separation or “gap” between their concept of employment and academic work ethic.

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