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Working While Working: Seattle U Students Balance Academic and Professional Responsibilities

Andru Zodrow and Ashley Hagar

When the average Seattle University student goes over their schedule for the week, it will likely contain a mix of class and study time. While the pursuit of academic excellence is certainly a shared goal amongst many students, Redhawks also have to pay rent and afford the cost of living in Capitol Hill—meaning a schedule that is likely to include at least a few hours of work outside the classroom.

Striking a balance between school and work is a tightrope which most upperclassmen walk. Mackenzie Lawrence, a fourth-year social work major who is currently conducting research on burnout in working professionals, has a busy schedule herself this quarter.

“My balance is sometimes effective and sometimes not so much. Right now, my average work day is 12-14 hours long. It’s very typical that I leave the house around 8:15 [a.m.], and I’m not back until 8 or 10 p.m.. I often have to be really strategic with my time, so I double up on my work time a lot,” Lawrence said.

Doubling up on work is a staple of busy student life, especially in the era of asynchronous courses in which class materials can be listened to via headphones while doing other work.

“One of the main ways is doing homework while I am at my Lifelong internship or on my lunch breaks at Trader Joe’s. If there’s a podcast I need to listen to for class, I can luckily do that while I am painting or working on art for Trader Joe’s, which is a huge advantage I have, and I’m super thankful for that,” Lawrence said.

In addition to fitting class responsibilities into one’s work schedule, several students emphasized the need to make time for replenishing activities. Kameron Powell, a law student graduating this spring, does outside work with Seattle U’s Black Law Student Association, the Washington Bar Licensure Task Force and conducts global human rights research.

“I do believe I have a workable balance between academics and work. I achieve that balance via good time management and prioritizing things in my life that provide me the mental and emotional space to rejuvenate and recover. That involves dancing, listening to music, reading, spending time outside and sometimes reminding myself that the work will always be there but your life one day won’t be,” Powell said.



Jordie Simpson

Seattle University signage by the north entrance to campus.

The threat of burnout is a persistent problem for working students, especially for those who do not have a safety net. A 2020 American Psychological Association study found that 87% of Gen Z college students designate school as a significant source of stress. Fourth-year Criminal Justice Major Jennifer Huffman concurs, but asserts that this pressure is even worse in high school.

"I do find it much easier to balance school and work in college compared to high school because I'm able to make my own class schedule. I'm also thankful that my employer is very understanding and flexible with my work hours, as I am still a full-time student," Huffman said.

Making a schedule is a key component of striking a balance between responsibilities for Hope Crosier, a fourth-year computer science student.

"I try to keep a consistent schedule to help me balance work and school. Keeping updated to-do lists and using my planner to visualize what I have going on in a week really helps," Crosier said.

Nursing program students, who face the unique onslaught of clinicals and tests alongside their course loads, emphasized scheduling as a method of balancing their work. The art of effective scheduling is a skill that the U.S. News and World Report cites as critical to student success given the litany of responsibilities competing for students' time in college. Kela Ziegner, a fourth-year nursing major, places an emphasis on school priorities when scheduling.

"It's definitely hard with nursing to have a job because we have clinical one to two times a week and classes on top of that. So trying to fit in work when you don't know your clinical schedule is a big challenge. I balance my work with school by not scheduling myself too far in advance and prioritizing school," Ziegner said.

Fellow Fourth-year Nursing major Desiree Hernandez also places her academic responsibilities over other forms of work.

"I keep many calendars to help balance school and work. Staying organized and dedicating specific time for classes, work, homework and self-care is so important," Hernandez said.

Kylee Longenecker, another fourth-year nursing major, highlighted the unpredictability of required clinical work in preparing for the quarter. She sees room for improvement in the balance between academics and work within the nursing program and highlighted what she argued is a privileged assumption that students can focus solely on studies.

"I understand that school is my priority, but I think that our school, professors and other students tend to be really ignorant to the fact that some people work to support their lives and have to work to be able to go to school," Longenecker said.

According to a 2021 University of Nevada study, "Nursing students reported statistically significant higher rates of life stress" than other undergraduate students during the pandemic. While many students feel that COVID's impact on their lives is diminishing, the stress of being a nursing major still remains high. Ziegner echoed Longenecker's assertion that Seattle U's nursing program could create a healthier culture around the balance between academics and work.

"I have found that in my major some instructors expect you not to work or solely focus on school when that is not always possible. College is expensive, and many students need to work to be able to afford tuition and rent. Overall, I feel like the university could be a bit more supportive," Ziegner said.

Hernandez has had an easier time with the balance between work and the demands of the nursing program, which she attributes to the flexibility of being a student-employee of the university.

"The school has been very supportive for me as a student worker. I got an on-campus job through work-study my freshman year and have been working there for three years now. My job works around my class schedule and has a maximum of 20 hours a week during the school year," Hernandez said.

Other Seattle U students echoed the value of flexibility that is offered by being a student worker in which managers are aware of the fact that students also have academic responsibilities. Ed Lawrence Hagape, a third-year public affairs major, works at the Office of the Registrar. He offered his appreciation for his supervisors, who understand the importance of his life as a student in addition to his work as an administrative team assistant.

"They are very flexible whenever I need a schedule change and during midterms, dead week and finals, they will ask for updated availabilities. This quarter, I had to reduce my hours because of my school workload, and they were understanding," Hagape said.

Sean Ishikawa, a fourth-year biology major, believes that on-campus work is the best option for busy students who also need to bring in an income during college. However, there is a catch that imposes a cost upon the flexibility of being a student worker from Ishikawa's perspective.

"Working for the school is best for one's schedule who needs [or] wants to work during school, but their pay is not great, so most have to seek work outside campus. This makes it harder to balance a school schedule as well as an academic schedule," Ishikawa said.

As the American Association of University Professors stated in a 2020 report, median family income rose by only 8% from 2008 to 2018, compared to a 36% rise in tuition at public universities. For private schools like Seattle U, tuition increases have also been persistent, with a 3.75% increase in tuition for the 2022-2023 school year alone. This has forced students who qualify for work-study to seek additional work off-campus to make ends meet.

"If the school could accommodate slightly better pay, I believe the students could perform better in school because they have to work less hours to pay for things and could spend that time studying instead of working," Ishikawa said.

Lawrence emphasized the particular struggle of students who are required to undertake unpaid internships, which Seattle U argues is a part of its professional development ethos as illustrated in the university's mission statement.

"In my opinion, the design of programs was not built with working students in mind. I have to complete an unpaid internship over the course of my senior year, and while it is very valuable, I don't feel that it's fair or ethical to ask students to work unpaid. Because of the required unpaid hours, I have to essentially make those hours up at a job that will pay me, which has accelerated my workload a lot," Lawrence said.

Several academic programs at Seattle U either require or incentivize students to take unpaid internships for academic credit. While these opportunities are certainly ways to secure connections for potential employment after graduation, they run the risk of putting low-income students at an inherent disadvantage. A bill proposed by Washington State Democrats to make unpaid internships illegal did not make it out of committee this legislative session, but labor advocates hope a future session will pick the issue back up.

Seattle U students continue to face an economic landscape that often demands that students work to live while penalizing students who cannot dedicate themselves entirely to academic work. While some programs make this balance easier than others, lawmakers and university administrators continue to consider how much pressure students should be under to study and afford the cost of living at the same time.