

The Stamina of Working Students: A Guide to Human Flourishing

Kalli McIver & Jacob Sablan

Illustrations by: Robyn Taylor-Neu



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Would you rather work a part-time job as a student or graduate with forty thousand dollars in debt?

On one hand, working during your degree could reduce the amount of debt you owe once you graduate. On the other hand, working part-time while studying could lengthen your degree or reduce your GPA. This is not an easy question to answer, and yet, students at Canadian post-secondary institutions must frequently grapple with whether to work and study simultaneously. The insistency of such questions also highlights the resilience of working students; we must make decisions that could impact anything from a grade on a midterm to the future of our degree. The working student deserves to be recognized, and our guide aims to do that.

The impetus for this guide is the [Hard-Working Student \(HWS\) project](#) - a project dedicated to learning about the impacts of term-time work on studies and vice versa. The HWS project was a longitudinal mixed-methods study conducted at UBC that spanned five years (2018-2022). Findings presented in this guide draw from quantitative data, representing the views of 1,732 undergraduate students in the 2018 survey and 2,987 undergraduate students in the 2019 survey, as well as qualitative data from 57 full-time undergraduate working students. In the project, the term "working-student" refers to an individual who engages in paid and/or unpaid work of ten or more hours per week alongside studying full time in an undergraduate degree program at a post-secondary institution.

Throughout this guide, we share what we have learned in our study, ask you questions, and present firsthand accounts of various students who participated in the project. More and more students must work while they study, yet arguably, the university still perceives the typical undergraduate student as someone solely dedicated to their studies. Our higher education system and governments perpetuate students' feelings of insecurity through other means, namely through tuition policies (Liu, Green and Pensiero 2016) that increase the financial

burden on students and their families while disregarding the demanding schedules of working students. The HWS results confirm that many undergraduate students juggle more than just their studies. With this guide, we hope to bring awareness to the situations that hard-working students face and provide some of the tools necessary to understand the experiences of working students in an institution that does not adequately recognize their existence.

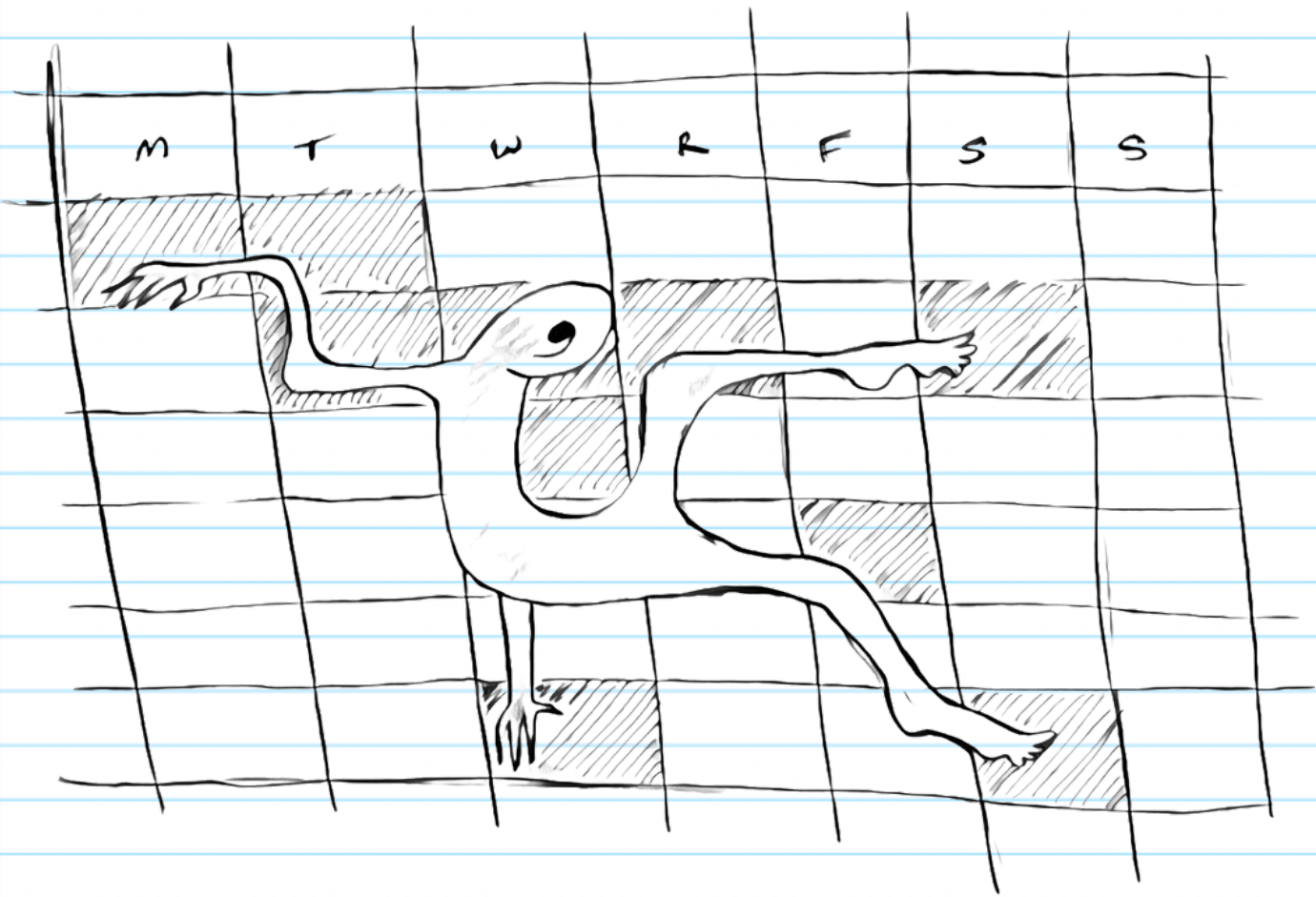
In writing this guide, we acknowledge that all students come from different backgrounds with different life experiences, diverse goals and aspirations, and various degrees of clarity about where to go and how to get there. Factors like race, gender, or financial background, may shape how you experience institutional barriers or systemic oppression as students in the world of work.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' when it comes to being a student - motivations will look different for everyone. It is because of this diversity that we do not propose a 'right' or 'wrong' way to be a working student. While our findings share similar themes, please take each experience as reflective of distinctive backgrounds, life histories, and intersecting identities. We encourage you to find a schedule that serves your own academic needs, fits your own work demands, and allows you time for self-care.



While this guide primarily aims to provide a sense of support for fellow working students, we also hope that faculty and staff will consider the experiences and findings shared in this guide and reflect on how they approach students who juggle more demands than the "typical" undergraduate student. With this in mind, we hope you enjoy the guide!

what does it mean to be a hard-working student?



Living as a working student involves more than the number of hours you work or courses you take. Working students must manage their time differently as they juggle academics, paid and/or unpaid work, social time, self-care, and much more. Part of acknowledging that you are a working student could mean asking yourself...

"To get anywhere in university you need to be involved in more than just classes - this is what it means to be a successful student."

- A Working Student

Do you organize your work, study, and other commitments or do your commitments organize you?

What do you prioritize? Have you found any strategies that make juggling your schedule easier?

Being at university can mean facing pressures to live up to the "ideal" student standard or PEPS* as we call it. If you identify as a working student, these pressures are more extreme, and the "ideal" narrative can be less attainable. Throughout this guide, we want to encourage you to break free from the "ideal" student standard (if it is something that dictates your experiences) and recognize that there are opportunities beyond what you should do during your degree.

Productive

Employable

Planful

Student

Ask yourself...

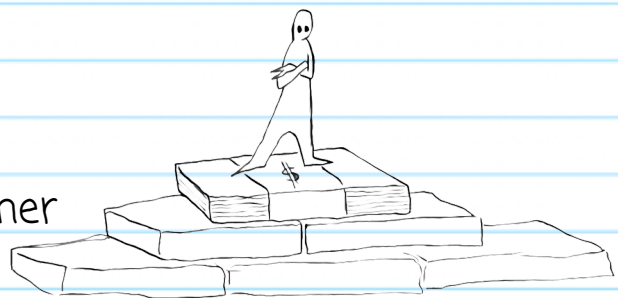
Do you want to add work or volunteering to your schedule? Why? What would allow you to add more commitments to your schedule?

Do you feel the need to schedule your social and leisure time?

There are many benefits and equally, many challenges that come with being a working student.

Some of the benefits might be ...

- **Increased financial stability** - whether you earn money to enjoy extra spending, keep up with bills or help your family.



- **Social engagement/networking opportunities** - through jobs, you can make new friends or build connections with people in the community, which can present potential job opportunities.

*Credit for the clever acronym PEPS goes to Alison Taylor

- **Personal and career growth** - through a job, you can find new areas of study or work, or even new hobbies that might interest you. You also can apply your classroom knowledge in a professional setting or think about what you study differently.
- **Increased productivity** - you may study more efficiently with more commitments in your schedule as you only have a specific amount of time that you are able to study.

"Being able to support myself and pay my bills [makes] me responsible and independent. [I]t will come in handy in later years as well, when I will be able to support me, not just me, but also my family. So, I think that respect for money and the ability to work for it and to earn it is something that I've developed from my paid work"

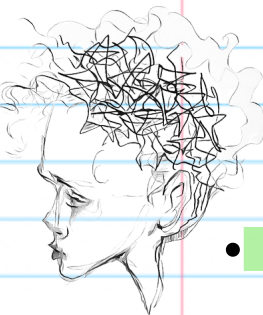
- A Working Student

"I don't know if you guys have ever worked in a restaurant but you are so tight, like you all party together, you all go out."

- A Working Student

Some of the challenges include...

- **Dealing with hostile work environments or workplace inequities** - work experiences can differ for everyone, and some can face more challenges than others. Employers may also have conditions about the minimum number of hours to be worked per week and some may be less flexible about students taking time away from work - even if they need this time to prepare for exams.
- **Cause of extra stress and anxiety** - With more responsibilities to juggle, students can face greater levels of stress and anxiety and may sacrifice time for self-care or friends and family. These compromises may adversely affect a student's ability to take advantage or schedule in time for their school's clubs or academic opportunities.



- **Academic compromise** - Working students may have to compromise between work time and academic responsibilities - this can have a negative impact on their GPA.

"I worked 21, 22 hours this week. So I just don't have time to do minimum 80 hours [of schoolwork per week] -- so [instead I have to do] 60 hours of schoolwork, 20 hours of work-work and I also have to attend all of my classes and also sleep and also eat a[n]d also feed myself. . .my sleep is bad, my mental health is bad, my eating habits are absolutely atrocious, my hygiene is degrading, my social battery -- gone." - A Working Student

Every student will face different benefits and challenges depending on their situation. This list of general pros and cons is a starting point to consider how working alongside your studies might impact you. Other things you may wish to consider are...

What are you most concerned about as an undergraduate student and how does adding work to your schedule impact that?

How do you hope to graduate? With less or no debt? With a strong GPA?



Do you find your work energizing or draining or both? Why?

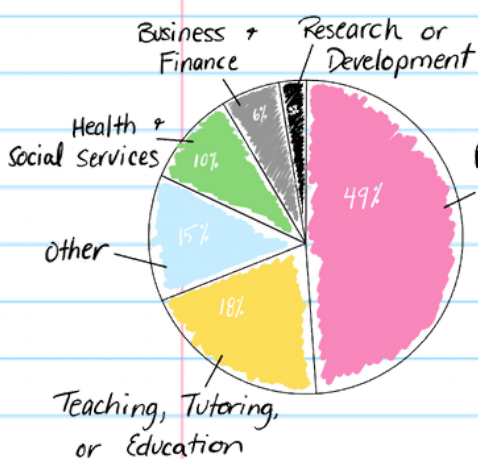
Types of Work

When we mention working students, we often assume that we're talking about paid work. Our study shows, however, that many undergraduates participate in or feel pressure to participate in unpaid (volunteer) work. The goal of this section is to compare paid and unpaid work to give you a better understanding of the potential benefits of each and possibly help you decide where you want to allocate your time.

Paid work...

What do you want from a paid position? Money? Experience? A social hub? A break from studies? Experience outside of the 'university bubble'?

Depending on what you are looking for, certain industries might be more appealing than others. Our study found that the top three sectors that students worked in were retail, accommodation, and food and beverage service.

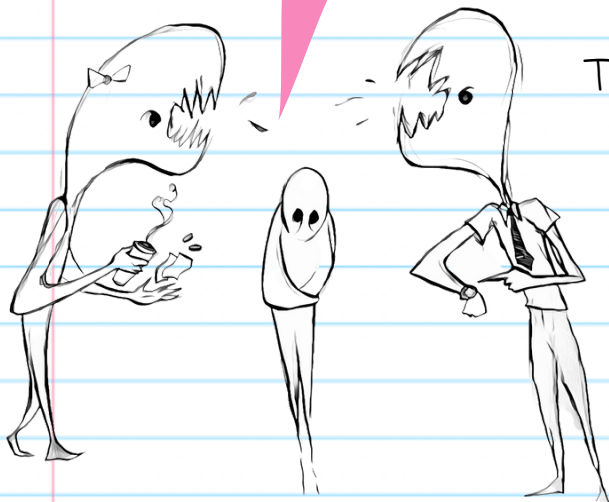


These industries may be more popular for students given how casual and readily available they are but there can be other reasons as well.

For example, working as a server in the food and beverage industry has incentives for students like receiving tips which can amount to a higher per-hour rate or late-night shifts that don't conflict with a class schedule.

But there can be setbacks as well like a lack of flexibility during the on-season (long weekends and holidays) and long, physically and mentally draining shifts.

"We have a blackout period where you are not allowed to book time off at all [and] for ours it's like right at the beginning of exams ... I could basically get fired for not being able to work the blackout period, because that is when they are super busy." - A Working Student



Things to consider...

Are you getting what you need from your paid position?

How does work typically affect you at the end of your shift?
Your emotional state? Energy? Motivation to study?
Relationships?

Unpaid work...

What makes you want an unpaid position? A chance for work experience? A chance to make friends? A chance to explore your interests? - or do you see it as an obligation?

Deciding whether to participate in unpaid work during your degree can be a difficult choice to make.

On the one hand, many volunteer positions offer opportunities for career advancement. Volunteers can gain leadership or other senior

positions more easily when compared to paid jobs, and this helps to build their workplace skills and create a stronger resume. **Volunteer opportunities** can also be diverse, encouraging students to explore different domains and potentially change their future career direction.

On the other hand, **these unpaid positions are not always available to everyone.** For students with busy schedules and or those who are financially self-supporting, it can be hard to allocate large amounts of time to a volunteer activity when they need that time to earn money or study. Also, these unpaid positions may be required for admission to particular graduate programs (e.g., medicine, social work) - thus, they are not, in fact, voluntary - which places additional pressure on the student and, for some, keeps these programs entirely out of reach.

Things to consider...

Are you volunteering because you have to or because you want to?



What would volunteer work look like for you if it were something you chose to do? What about paid work?

How can you cater your volunteer experience to your interests? Where would you find such volunteer opportunities?

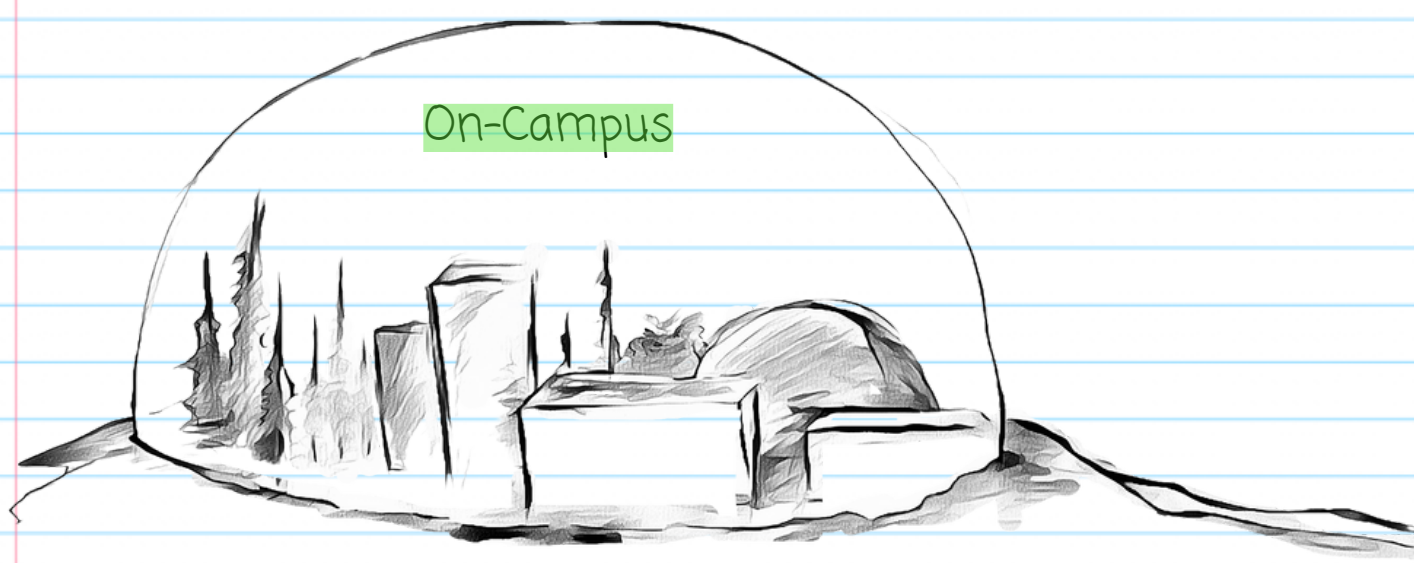
Considering where to work

When finding a job, you are not only choosing how to earn money but also how to spend your time. Likewise, the kind of job that works for you in your first year may not be the same as that which works in your third or fourth year because your career interests or personal needs might change.

You may often want to ask yourself...

what tradeoffs am I willing to make? Why?

In this section, we will explore the differences between working on and off campus, providing pros and cons that could help you determine where you might find the most suitable work.



In many ways, the convenience of studying, working, and even living on campus is unmatched. UBC can feel like its own community of friends and families, with many food places to enjoy; it can be comfortable living in a close-knit community. However, studying, working, and sometimes living in the same space can blur the lines between activities and become challenging to establish boundaries.

Some pros for on campus life could include...

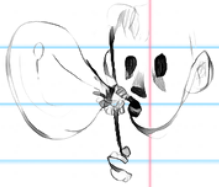
- Working on-campus can be flexible for students living in

residence or who do not want to commute far from the university.

- It can be an excellent opportunity to connect with fellow university students, work with friends or network with professors - depending on the campus job.



- For example, the campus provides job workshops and employment programs such as 'Work Learn' which are highly regulated and more flexible for students' class schedules.



The main **con** for on campus life is that it can seem like you are living in a bubble - As you study, work, and live in the same space, you may find it tiring to be surrounded by classmates and professors, constantly thinking about courses, careers, and clubs, filling your life with competition.

Off-Campus

Off-campus jobs can have both charms and troubles as well:

- The diversity of workspaces and co-workers provides a chance to **build new relationships** with new people.
- Getting off-campus work allows for exploration of the Vancouver area and an opportunity to **explore topics and learn skills** outside of the university community.
- These jobs can **lack flexibility** and require added time pressure (such as commuting) which can clash with your



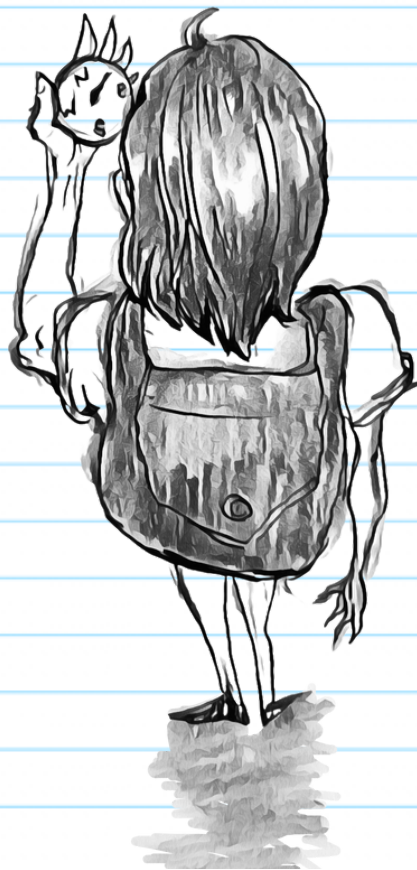
school schedule and can increase the time required for a work shift.

"... for me, even on my 2 hour shifts, it takes 4 hours of my day, because it'll take me an hour to get there, 2 hour shift, and then an hour to get back. So it takes double the time that I work [because of commute time] ... And so the commute is actually a big aspect of working" - A Working Student

When considering where to work, some things to think about might be...

What standards do you set as you consider where to work?

How will the features of your workplace impact your ability to juggle other priorities in your life?



So what? How Working Students Cope with Stress

This section includes a collection of experiences from students which we hope will provide advice and insights for dealing with the many factors of being a working student.

"I like to keep pretty organized; I have multiple calendars and 'to do' lists. I have a calendar, like a physical one, and then one on my laptop. And I always write out every single day, what I have to do that day and what's due on that day, it could be like schoolwork or sorority stuff or just in general, things I have to do."

This is a domestic student engaging in paid work on-campus for 10 hours a week as well as 6 hours of volunteer work per week. They live at home and are supported by their parents.

This is a first-generation*, domestic university student who is self-supporting financially. They live off-campus and engage in 15 hours per week of paid work off-campus as well as 3 hours of volunteer work. They spend 15 hours a week commuting to school and work.

"[W]hen I have things that are happening at the same time, I manage them better. If I have like a free day all day, I feel like I'm going to waste it. 'Oh, I can do it later,' so I don't use it as efficiently. So, working, besides the money and all those things, it just gives you a sense of like, time management. ... So like, I have three hours to study. If I don't, then I have to work and then I will lose that time. So, in three hours I will just study. But if I didn't have work, I would be like oh I can just study at night, and I would just procrastinate and keep procrastinating and then it never happens."

"I learned that when I am in the job at that moment I want to give it my 100% and I do need rest time. I need a day or 2 off in a week. I learned that through working in the summer with the course. I thought that I could you know do all 7 days as long as I sleep 8 hours it's fine, but I realized that to keep that sort of energy I need one or two days off"

This is an international student from Southeast Asia who has a scholarship covering half of his tuition. He lives on-campus, engaging in 2 jobs, both on and off campus totaling 12 hours of paid work a week. He also partakes in 12 hours of volunteer work weekly.

*First-generation students are those whose parents did not attend university.

"... in my first year ... I kind of went through a lot of different clubs a lot of different opportunities ... trying to see if I could fit into those positions and how well I can contribute in those. So, I think that procedure kind of helped me find what my strengths and my weaknesses were ... It first of all helped me kind of understand what my capabilities and what my limits were. It kind of helped me understand that I like working in a team"

This is an international student from Southeast Asia whose parents financially support them, but the student wishes to pay them back. They live on-campus and engage in 19 hours of paid work on-campus and 13 hours of unpaid work weekly.

"I feel that there's no boundary towards your limits. [...] till high school I never worked. Also, I used to find my current workload back then stressful. It was like yeah, how do people get the time to manage ten different things together? How do people even get the time to volunteer for organizations and go and work? But then, you know, as I slowly and steadily started challenging myself, I find the more you challenge yourself or the more you kind of understand yourself and the more you can push the limits farther back [...] You get used to your work pressure. But you feel that there is a limit, that there is a bar that you cannot escape. They're like, 'Okay, yeah, 30 hours a week, that is the maximum I can do. It's impossible for me to cross that.' But you know, after I started working, after I started taking up all these positions, I kind of realized that there is no bar to what you can achieve. No bar to what you can do. Because to be honest, like, it's been two years that I have been in university. I haven't had a cup of coffee 'till now. Not a single cup of coffee."

This is an international student from East Asia, who did not have work experience before coming to Canada. They worked on campus for 10 hours a week.

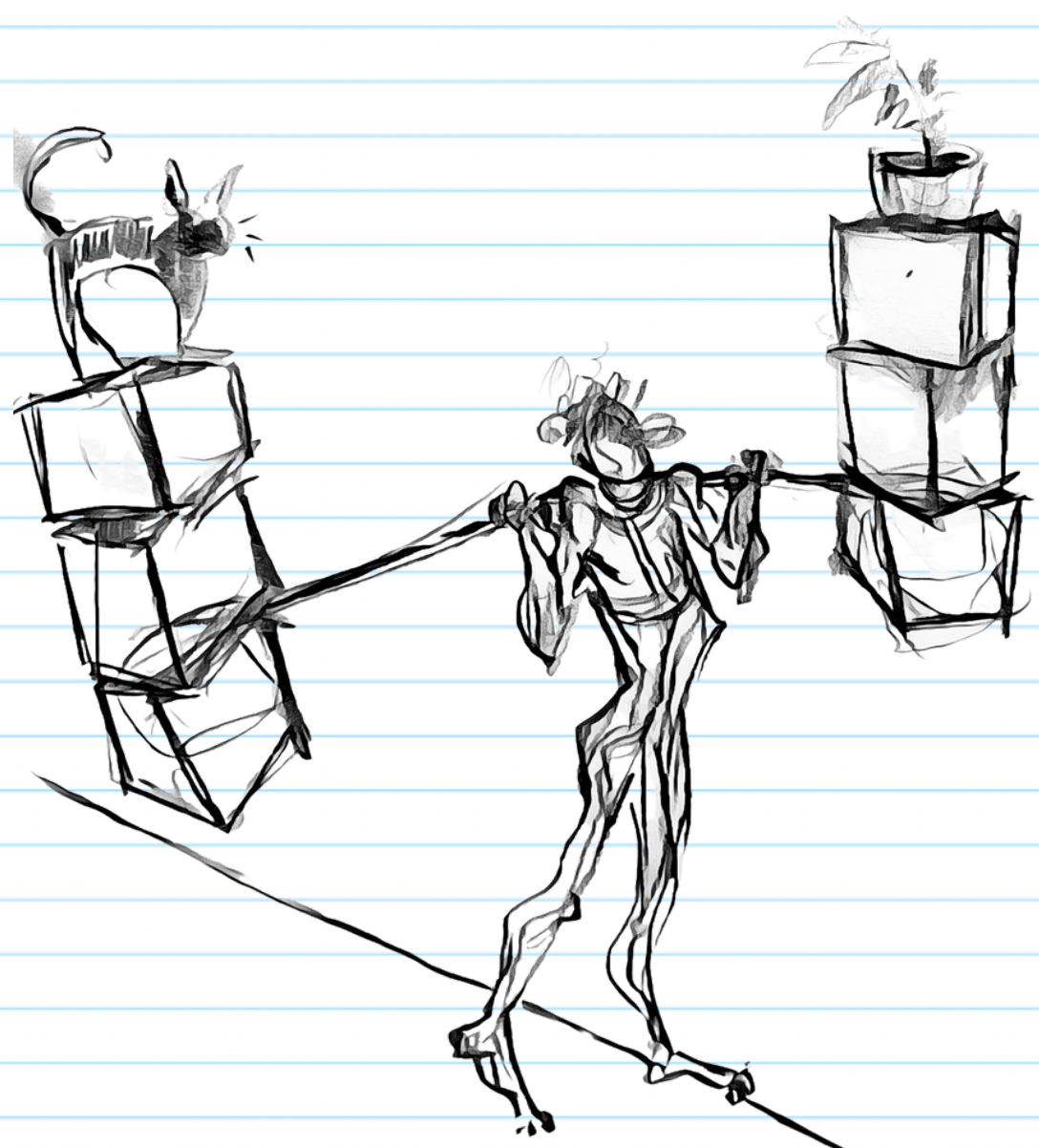
"Coming in, I was intimidated. I remember how everyone was so bright-eyed and ambitious. I was actually a little afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up with all these people. But now as I'm graduating, I realize that I can actually take on a lot more challenge than I thought I could... [and] you don't have to take the path that every other person takes."

For the Faculty

To the university faculty and student services, we understand and appreciate your dedication to enhancing the quality of our education and wellbeing.

However, many working students want more flexibility and recognition of their demanding schedules. Below is a reflection from Alison Taylor, a professor at UBC and principal investigator of the Hard Working Student research project.

Read from the perspective of university staff and see what Alison has to say about the nature of balancing work and study.



“Leading the Hard Working Student research project has given me a greater understanding of working students in their diversity, as well as changes in undergraduate life over time.

Many years ago, as a first-generation university student, I was able to work full time in summer to pay my tuition and living expenses for the coming year. Today's students, particularly those who are self-funding, face greater pressure because of much higher costs, especially in cities like Vancouver.

I learned from our interviews that many students simply aren't able to give the expected time and energy to their studies because of financial pressures. These financial pressures also tend to make career and academic exploration more costly, and therefore less likely. This may be especially true for international students who pay up to five times more tuition.

Overall, the varied impacts of students' term-time work tend to be invisible. The majority of students work off-campus in service sector jobs where employment tends to be less regulated, and at times, exploitative. Part-time campus employment related to studies is less common.

It's therefore not surprising that while many students feel that their work enriches and complements their studies, others find that it adds yet another layer of stress. It can also be very challenging for students to live in the present given the demands of the 'PEP student' discourse.

Given our findings, I suggest the following:

For administrators and policymakers...

- Explore ways to reduce the financial burden on students, including ensuring university-sponsored work opportunities are equitably distributed.

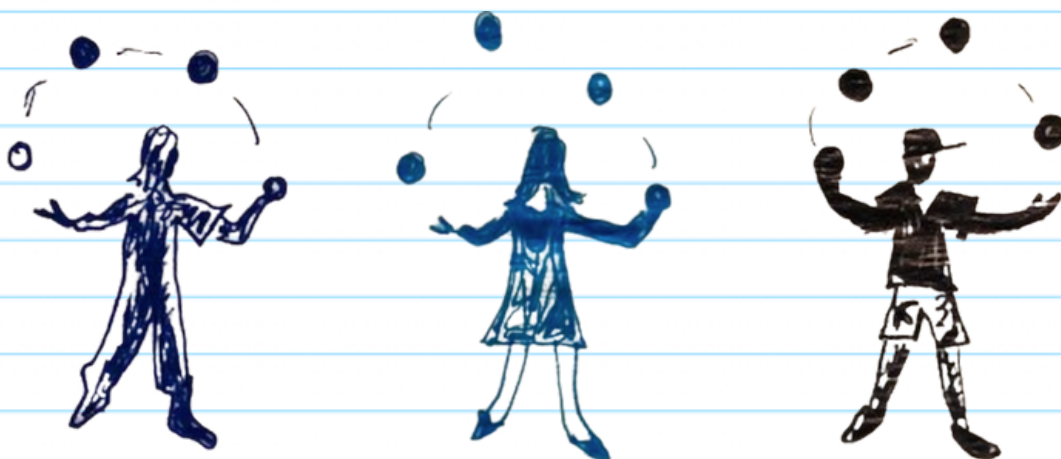
For instructors and program coordinators...

- Recognize the complexity and necessity of work for many students. In class introductions, ask about their paid and unpaid work commitments too. Include 'work demands' as a reason for granting assignment and exam accommodations.

For students yourselves...

- As a group, educate university staff about 'working student' life. (This study aims to do that too!) Talk to instructors as well as other students about your situation. Read over this guide and take time to reflect on the questions posed as well as others that are specific to your own situation. Everyone's 'juggling act' is different ... and that's ok”

- Alison ☺



Concluding Remarks from the Authors

As you make your way to the end of our guide, we want to thank you for reading, and we hope that we have encouraged you to reflect on your experiences.

With this guide, we hope to make tangible some of the experiences that working students may face throughout their degree. Both of us are working students and we know that the stress of working, and studying can sometimes seem invisible but as we read the reflections of student participants and learned more about the study findings, we realized we weren't the only ones who were struggling to keep up.

The preconception about university is that it is a constant struggle - academically, financially, sometimes socially - and this is true, albeit not the whole story. Students can have this idea that if you're not struggling and pushing yourself to the limit in academic or other work, then you aren't trying hard enough in your degree. However, not everyone can live up to and benefit from 'THE university experience'. Everyone's story will look different, and YOUR university experience will depend on your goals and priorities.

With this in mind, one of our student participants shared a good point:

"do things if you don't feel qualified, like, what does that really mean? Do you have the motivation and the excitement and the inspiration to put energy into those things? If so, then do it like take those opportunities"

The idea of "being qualified" contributes to the struggles that many of us face - we've all heard of 'imposter syndrome' - but it's important to remember that we are creating our own experiences and that our time in university cannot always be compared to the experiences of

others, nor can it perfectly measure up to the PEPS standard.

Even for both of us, we found our position in this project through Work Learn but it wasn't easy to apply:

"As a first-year student, I felt pressured by my peers and PEPS culture to build career-relevant experience early on in my degree. Before landing this position, I applied to tens of employers before hearing the response I wanted. My advice to you is that even if you feel inadequate about the number of work experiences you have or your level of competency --- apply anyways. The job posting for this Research Assistantship wanted third or fourth years, but I still took the risk and landed the position as a first-year!"

- Jacob Sablan

- Kalli McIver

"When I first read about the HWS project in the job description for this position, I immediately felt a sense of passion and excitement for the idea that I might be able to apply my degree and my ideas to something that I want to be doing. This was quickly followed by a sense of fear because my resume lacked both professional work experience and volunteer experience specific to the research field. I applied anyways despite feeling underqualified and it has been exactly the experience I had hoped it would."

We don't propose an answer to this dilemma, but we hope to at least give you the same sense of awareness and community that we felt while working on this project. We wish you all the best with your future endeavors!

Resources

More About Our Study

If you are interested in the academic aspect of our guide and the stories of working students, check out our blog site! Click on the links to learn more about the papers our team wrote, links to conference presentations, podcast episodes, our project origins and the folks behind the research.

- HWS Email Address: hardworking.student@ubc.ca
- [HWS Blog Site](#)
- Reports Written About the Study
 - [Hard Working Students Report of 2018 and 2019 Survey Findings](#)
 - [Student Volunteer Work and Learning: Undergraduates' Experiences and Self-Reported Outcomes](#)

Resources for Working at UBC

For those of you attending UBC, below is a multitude of resources ranging from career advice to support for marginalized students. Utilize the UBC Careers Online Portal to search for Work Learn positions or take the free courses provided by the university on your rights for working on campus.

- UBC Centre for Student Involvement and Careers
 - [Career Resources](#)
 - [For Students From Historically Marginalized Communities and the Rights of Workers](#)
 - [UBC CSIC Job Search Portal](#)
 - [First Generation Students Union, UBC](#)
 - [How to Find Work & Research Opportunities at UBC](#) (from UBC Centre for Student Involvement & Careers YouTube channel)
 - [Understanding the Labour Market and Exploring Career Possibilities](#) (from UBC Centre for Student Involvement & Careers YouTube Channel)

- Free UBC Courses (Safety and Risk Services)
 - Required Training For All UBC Workers
 - Financial Wellness Resources Canvas course (info on loans, debt repayment, discounts, housing and more)
 - UBC Work Learn Fundamentals Canvas Module
- Job Searching
 - On-Campus Job Opportunities
 - UBC's Career Event Workshops (Career Fairs, Webinars for Job Search Skills, etc.)
 - UBC Careers Online Portal
 - UBC's Work Learn Program
 - AMS CampusBase for volunteer opportunities
 - AMS Job Search Portal
 - UBC Recreation
 - UBC Housing
 - UBC Food Services
 - UBC Annual Giving
 - UBC Libraries
- Other Career Resources
 - UBC's Co-Op Program
 - UBC HR Employee Handbook for Students
 - Collective Agreements for UBC Employees
 - BC Employment Standards Act (Useful for any job, on or off campus)

Resources for Working Off-Campus

If you want to find work (paid or unpaid) that is unaffiliated with the university, using sites such as LinkedIn or Indeed are excellent platforms to start. You can strengthen your resume and cover letter writing or find a position within your desired location or field; these platforms make it convenient through the help of their tailored job search engines.

- Indeed
 - Career Advice from Indeed
 - Writing a Cover Letter
 - "What are your weaknesses" - 8 things you can say.
 - Accepting a Job Offer Professionally.
 - How To Use The STAR Interview Response Technique
 - 18 Important Considerations Before Accepting A Job Offer

- LinkedIn
 - Student Career Resources
 - How To Build A Great Student Profile
 - How To Write A Resume That Gets The Recruiter's Attention
 - Practice for Common Job Interview Questions
 - Starting Your First Job Search On LinkedIn



HWS Blogsite



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