

## Improving Students' Work-Life Balance on Campus

For students, enrolling in higher education is about much more than furthering one's studies; rather, it is seen as a critical stage in students' transition into adulthood. These short but formative years are a time for students to form lasting and meaningful relationships, develop crucial life skills, expand their social network, explore new ideas and subjects, and broaden their perspective on the world and the role they play in it. More importantly, earning a degree and exhibiting mastery of the experiences that come with it is considered the key to unlocking the door to better job opportunities and career success.

In order to take advantage of all the opportunities higher education has to offer, and to maximize their academic progress and social advancement, students must be able to strike a balance between completing their assignments, staying involved on campus, fulfilling additional responsibilities such as work, family, and financial obligations, and maintaining their health and wellbeing. Although everyone has to juggle multiple obligations in life, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to maintaining a work-life balance. Rather, this balance is decided based on students' perceptions of how well they are managing their obligations, and their level of satisfaction in doing so; consequently, students are responsible for assessing the necessary or desired balance between obligations that they must strive for individually.

That said, maintaining a work-life balance is all about managing one's stress levels and mitigating exposure to excessive stress—a skill that is particularly important [during high-stress situations](#), such as exam season, major life events (i.e., losing a loved one, moving away from home, or going through a breakup), or recent events including a global pandemic or [recession](#). While the [benefits](#) of exhibiting a strong work-life balance include a stronger academic performance; higher creativity and innovation; a greater determination to achieve goals; increased motivation and engagement; and stronger social connections, an imbalance between work and life responsibilities has been associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression disorders; decreased productivity and a poor academic performance; lower commitment to studies and career advancement; higher rates of [burnout](#); self-enforced social isolation; poor physical and mental health; and even the intention to drop out of school.<sup>1</sup>

As global crises continue to threaten to disrupt students' post-secondary experience ahead of the 2022-2023 academic year—heightening the anxiety of roughly [80 percent of students](#) across the world who are already struggling to maintain their wellbeing and [manage high levels of stress](#) as a result of the pandemic—it is imperative that institutions emphasize the importance of developing a strong work-life balance to their students across all campus programs and services, and look for ways to assist students in

managing their numerous obligations and personal goals, and the stress that comes along with it.

### **Why Maintaining Academic Work-Life Balance is Important for Students**

- **It reinforces students' sense of agency and self-efficacy.** In line with the [theory of self-determination](#), students are motivated to learn and grow when three key psychological needs are met: control, competence, and connection. By attaining a strong work-life balance, students are able to exert more control over their time and energy, and consequently perceive that they have a greater level of autonomy over their academic and personal lives. This heightens students' sense of self-efficacy—or their belief in their own capabilities and competence. By perceiving that they have control over their lives and thus perceiving that they have the ability to manage responsibilities and the stress that comes with them, they are more motivated to act on their autonomy and abilities and achieve both academic and personal goals. Conversely, in the absence of a strong work-life balance, students are at an increased risk for [burnout](#), or a syndrome marked by emotional exhaustion, reduced performance and accomplishment, and a loss of identity or ambitions.
- **It improves students' academic performance.** As a better work-life balance promotes a stronger sense of self-efficacy, it therefore can improve a student's motivation to learn, perform, and succeed in school. Studies conducted within work environments have found that self-efficacy is associated with individuals' confidence in their job and a higher commitment to themselves, their team, and their organization to succeed.<sup>2</sup> For students, this may translate as a higher confidence in their various roles on campus and a higher commitment to themselves, their peers, their professors, advisors, mentors, and leaders, and their institutions as a whole. They may be more committed to putting more effort into both individual and group assignments, striving for high marks, and positively representing their peers, professors, and institutions through their accomplishments. This higher commitment, coupled with students' ability to better manage their time and energy, can enhance their studying habits, resulting in better performances and higher grades.
- **It promotes students' involvement on campus.** As students develop a greater sense of control over their lives, allowing them to divert needed—but not excessive—time and energy towards their studies and further reinforcing their confidence, they are more likely to divert additional time and energy towards various extracurricular roles on campus. Studies on the effects of job autonomy and job satisfaction workers have indicated that those with higher levels of perceived

control and satisfaction are more likely to have a positive attitude toward their work environment and exhibit a higher commitment to their organization—adopting their organizations’ values and missions.<sup>3</sup> In the context of higher education, such research implies that students’ who exhibit higher levels of autonomy and satisfaction with their education and their academic performance will feel motivated to get involved on campus and live out their institution’s various missions. Research has also indicated that high levels of satisfaction with academic performance and progress will further motivate students to continue to work towards self-actualization, which will require students to step out of their comfort zones or follow niche interests they have not yet had the opportunity to explore before.<sup>2</sup>

- **It fosters positive social relationships.** As stated, perceived connections and social support are essential to students’ wellbeing and motivation to thrive and self-actualize. As students regain time for other responsibilities outside of their education and feel empowered to get involved on campus, a strong work-life balance can enhance students’ sociability, allowing them to develop more [meaningful connections](#) with peers, coworkers, friends, and family as they divert more time and energy towards campus, familial, and communal responsibilities. These connections allow students to better maintain their mental health and mitigate mental health challenges such as stress, heavy courseloads, financial strain, trauma, and other circumstances that may disrupt their academic progress or personal growth. Conversely, a work-life imbalance has been associated with poor maintenance of relationships, which can evoke feelings of irritability, anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidality.<sup>4-5</sup>

### **Challenges for Students Managing Academic Programs and Student Life**

- **Lingering effects of the pandemic.** Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an indelible impact on students’ stress levels and their ability to cope with and manage stress, as a [new survey](#) conducted by BestColleges revealed that more than two-thirds of 2022 college graduates (69 percent) argue that the circumstances caused by the pandemic have increased the demand for work-life balance. Studies on the psychological effects of lockdown have found that not only did students struggle more than the general population, but also that the experience had a profound effect on students’ self-efficacy.<sup>6-7</sup> In a study conducted among post-secondary students in Ireland, participants reported feeling a tremendous sense of loss: a loss of independence; loss of opportunities; loss of communication; loss of social support; and finally, a loss of meaning and purpose in life—all factors that correlate with students’ needs for control, connection, and competence.<sup>8</sup> In

accordance with research that contends that disruptions to everyday functioning have a negative impact on individuals' cognitive and affective wellbeing, students reported that the loss of routine and structure, separation from their peers, professors, family, and friends, and the constrictions of remote learning contributed to decreased productivity, a lack of motivation and momentum, lower morale, and a diminished outlook on life.<sup>9</sup> As a result, students found it harder to effectively manage daily tasks, family life, connection with friends, and their academic workload.

Even as many students return to campus, the effects that the pandemic has had on their self-esteem, socialization, and self-efficacy persist—including disordered and unbalanced patterns and behaviors that students may have developed, which inhibit their ability to form connections, seek help, and manage stress. As Paul Fleming, President of Student Assistant Programs & Training, notes, “students and everyone around them had to make significant life changes during the pandemic, many of which—having made them in college—aren’t going to go back.” This includes changes that their institutions’ faculty and staff have made during the pandemic as well, as Fleming adds that the comfort of working from home and lingering health threats have caused older educators to consider retirement—exacerbating a growing [staffing shortage](#) throughout higher education institutions. Consequently, Fleming argues that students are continuing to feel disconnected and unsupported and robbed of what they understood to be an education, which is continuing to hinder students’ resiliency and coping abilities as they head into the fall semester.

- **Challenges with online learning.** Before the normalization of online education in 2020, studies examining the efficacy of remote learning found that students’ technological expertise and familiarity with virtual platforms had a significant influence on their participation and performance within their online classes, namely by affecting their self-discipline, motivation, and attitudes toward their learning and capabilities.<sup>10</sup> For example, when students do not know how to navigate digital spaces and applications or do not have a comprehensive understanding of technologies such as computers, laptops, and tablets, not only is their learning disrupted, but the extra obstacles that they face to accessing and participating in their education can make it harder for students to balance school, work, and life responsibilities.

Further, the loss of rigid, physical boundaries between work, school, and personal time as the rise of digital tools such as Zoom, Skype, Teams, GroupMe, and other platforms instill students with a sense of constant connectedness to their classes makes it harder for students to completely check out of school at the end of the day, or on weekends, and

makes it harder for them to truly engage in downtime, self-care, and social activities, which can increase their risk for burnout.<sup>11-14</sup> Adding to this risk, the study of Irish post-secondary students also revealed that many participants find virtual learning to be more competitive—even hostile at times—as students lose a lack of mutual trust and fret over the work their classmates are putting into their education and whether they are behind or ahead of the rest of their peers, which can create a work-life imbalance as students become all-consumed by their academic obligations.

- **Pressure to overwork.** Contributing to this competitive nature of online and in-person learning is present-day society's tendency to overwork. Especially in the United States where this culture of overworking [is more perceptible](#), students face enormous pressures to ensure that they do not lag behind their peers, are taking advantage of every opportunity available to them, and are filling all of their available time up with additional academic, internship, and work experiences. This undue stress can lead to mental health issues such as burnout, depression, and anxiety, and can corrupt students' perceptions of manageability and their own capabilities. Further, these pressures can cause students to feel guilty about taking a break, taking time off, and prioritizing other aspects of their life such as time with friends, family, and time with themselves, which leads to lower productivity, poorer academic performance, fatigue, irritability, and other mental and physical health issues, making it difficult for them to fulfill their various responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>
- **Financial and work-related stress.** Other factors that can contribute to work-life imbalances among post-secondary students include financial strain and economic uncertainty—conditions that become more debilitating during times of economic instability, [such as now](#). These can have a negative impact on students' academic performance and work-life balance, as Fleming contends that periods of economic hardship push students to reassess their priorities. "There is a lot of confusion, uncertainty, and fear on campus right now," he admits. "Students are starting to ask themselves: am I going to spend this time and money for this education, and will it in fact be useful to me?"

Another outcome of the current economic situation that can significantly disrupt students' work-life balance is that more students are working. According to a [report](#) released by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Georgetown CEW), nearly 70 percent of all full-time post-secondary students are working, while [Mental Health America](#) reported that this number is even higher for part-time students, at 80 percent. In its report, the Georgetown CEW revealed that a majority of students log somewhere between 15 to 30 hours per week, and that half of those students have grade averages at a C or below. As students struggle with high job demands, inflexible schedules, and

pressures to perform, in addition to their financial obligations such as housing and tuition fees, meal plans, utilities, and student loans, it may become harder for some to manage their academic workloads, social and family lives, and extracurricular commitments.

- **Familial obligations.** A particular sector of students that is being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, changes to course modality, pressures to overwork, and financial and job-related stress are parents and caregivers. According to a [recent Trellis report](#), nearly a quarter of undergraduate students (22 percent) are raising children while in school, while the report also revealed that over half of these students (52 percent) will not complete their degree compared to a third of non-parenting students as a result of financial circumstances, a lack of childcare, food, housing, and energy insecurity, and limited access to practical resources. As parenting students juggle financial struggles—parenting students were more likely to report running out of money, more frequently and more likely to report using public assistance to meet basic needs—on top of caregiving responsibilities, the report found that these students are at a higher risk for burnout, which compromises their ability to pursue their degree and manage the workload that entails.

### **Who's Responsible for Restoring these Imbalances?**

While work-life balance is often recognized as a personal responsibility, younger generations in particular are starting to hold their leaders accountable for providing them with the resources, services, and environment necessary to effectively manage academic, work, and social responsibilities without having to sacrifice their wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> While quantitative data surrounding students' opinions are limited, new studies among recent post-secondary graduates offer institutions insight into who the expectations students have regarding work-life balance heading into the 2022-2023 academic year. For instance, BestColleges' survey found that an overwhelming majority of 2022 graduates (89 percent) believe that maintaining a work-life balance is very important to them, while 74 percent of respondents believe that achieving work-life balance takes mutual effort from both employees and their employers. According to Fleming, the same is true for institutions.

"It isn't only the responsibility of an institution to provide for students during their brief time on campus; it's their responsibility to provide opportunities for the future," Fleming admits, arguing, "and that requires taking care of students' welfare in addition to their education." But for today's students—especially those living off campus or learning remotely—this is not something that's really been clarified, he adds, as students who are enrolled in asynchronous online courses, who may be living at home or out of state and who therefore have little access to campus resources, services, or support from peers, faculty, and staff

of their institutions, are left wondering what they are paying for and what they are entitled to.

According to Fleming, those answers lie in their student handbooks, where institutions enumerate what they will provide to students once they are enrolled. “Every institution has a commitment or a mission statement that typically says ‘we’re going to give you your education, we’re going to take responsibility for your welfare and for your mental health, and here’s how we are going to do it.’” For example, in the University College Dublin’s [Mission, Vision, and Values](#) statement, UCD commits itself to the “holistic development of each student to her or his fullest potential,” while [UCLA](#) and [McGill University](#) actualize their commitment to their students’ wellbeing by offering digital guidebooks on how to access various services provided by their institutions. But in other handbooks, like the University College London’s [student handbook](#), pledges to support student wellbeing are followed by a disclaimer stating that it is the student’s responsibility to seek support and take charge of their welfare.

This can have consequences for institutions, who are currently experiencing college dropout rates as high as [40 percent](#) among undergraduate students, as they struggle to balance their various obligations during a time fraught with [financial trauma](#), [social unrest](#), and continuous [public health threats](#) amidst a digital era that continues to blur the boundaries between work and life. According to a [report](#) from Admissionly, over half of students (54 percent) who dropped out cited a lack of work-school-life balance as their reason for doing so, while financial pressure, challenges with social and family lives, and mental, emotional, and physical health issues were additional factors reported. These incidences are proving costly for institutions, as a [recent report](#) from ThinkImpact revealed that an estimated \$3.8 million is lost each year as a result of dropping out of a post-secondary institution, on top of monetary losses due to a concerning [decline in enrollment rates](#).

With that said, in order to effectively retain and support students, institutions need to be doing more to develop and maintain a stronger work-life balance among their student body; this means going a step beyond investing in and offering various services to support students’ welfare and ensuring that they are actually taking advantage of the resources available to them and getting the assistance that they need to thrive both academically and personally.

### **How Institutions Can Foster a Better Work-Life Balance Among Their Students**

- **Acknowledging and providing personalized attention to students that are struggling with their work-life balance.** A [recent article](#) released by the Hechinger Report on rising dropout rates in higher education implied that a potential solution



to declining enrollment would be to provide more personal attention to students, their struggles, and their needs; a strategy that the interim vice president and dean of undergraduate students at California State University, San Bernadino, likened to “hand-holding,” remarking that she has heard students say things such as, “Wow, it’s like somebody actually cared,” after being contacted and assisted by staff at the university. The article also touched upon signs that institutional leaders should look out for that might indicate that students are struggling to balance their academic and personal lives, such as enrolling in fewer classes, or withdrawing from classes they had been registered for during the first month of the semester. By showing prompt, personal attention to students who need support, and providing them that space to open up about their struggles balancing their time, energy, and commitments, leaders can strengthen students’ sense of self-efficacy and restore their work-life balance.

- **Partnering with 24/7 telehealth and student support services.** While there is plenty that institutions can do to provide effectual support to their students, Fleming claims that there are limits to the support they can provide, especially when it comes to offering both immediate and long-term support. “If a student could get an appointment within a week or more, they’d be lucky,” he admits. “Usually, first appointments go to crisis cases, not somebody who is just needing perspective.” He asserts that in order to provide more holistic and long-term support to students (such as by conducting weekly follow-ups, as Fleming proposes. “That’s how the students learn to walk with their problem and develop some of their own techniques of dealing with them,”), there must be some type of crisis intervention, which Fleming argues the institution cannot provide alone. “They can’t do all that on campus; they can’t be available to students 24/7 live.”

As a solution, Fleming argues that institutions need to partner with outside providers to offer more immediate and round-the-clock support to students. “They need professional people answering the phone and setting things up who can differentiate the level of problems, develop a treatment plan, and then arrange for it to be fulfilled,” he says. “That really is not within the ability of student mental health centers.” For examples, leaders can consider plans that other institutions have recently adopted, such as the new programs at [LeHigh University](#) and the [Community College of Rhode Island](#). Adopting these programs is a great way for institutions to support students who may be fully-remote, balancing additional work, caregiving, or parenting responsibilities, or who may be facing challenges to receiving in-person support, such as barriers to transportation to get to campus or barriers to accessing services during office hours.



- **Designing resiliency and stress-management training programs for students, staff, faculty, and on-campus clinicians.** Another way that institutions can promote and restore students' work-life balance is by designing and implementing programs that will allow students to cultivate the skills necessary to balance their numerous responsibilities, including their daily personal needs. This can include wellness programs that educate students on the importance of developing a good sleep schedule and provide them with [tips on how to maintain one](#), especially during exam season where students are likely to stay up later than usual to study or finish larger projects. Additional program topics include the importance and benefits of [adding exercise to daily routines](#)—including where they can access fitness facilities on campus, how they can practice self-care and [devote time to their own hobbies and interests](#) in the midst of fulfilling academic and job responsibilities, and how students can [recognize and address burnout](#).

It's important that institutions extend these services to their faculty, staff, and clinicians as well. Studies have shown that campus faculty and staff are dealing with rates of stress and burnout [equal to those of students](#), which can significantly reduce the level and quality of support that institutions can provide to their students if their professors, advisors, and mentors are emotionally checked out and stretched thin. According to Fleming, students' lack of understanding around how to maintain a work-life balance is largely the result of a domino-effect of their instructors and mentors having never been taught how to establish one themselves. "Work-life balance is something that nobody knows because most adults, and most employers and institutions that have these plans, don't know," he admits. "So that, too, has to be adjusted."

- **Collaborating with students on student wellbeing initiatives.** As students transition out of a prolonged period of social isolation and physical separation from peers, there is a greater need for social connection amongst student populations in order to regain a sense of belongingness needed to thrive and manage stress. An easy way that institutions can foster positive relationships between peers while equipping students with the skills and resources necessary to manage stress is by collaborating with student-led organizations on resiliency and wellness presentations, programs, and events, in addition to establishing [peer support groups](#), which have proven to be an effective alternative to clinical or professional assistance that students can turn to for more informal support. Fleming believes that being able to talk amongst peers about one's struggles with maintaining a work-life balance is crucial in order for students to regain confidence in their abilities and develop skills and plans to manage stress. "Students really need to be able to speak

with someone who has the ability and background to answer more specifically to them, and help them discern what they need to do.”

- **Drafting policies and syllabi that promote students’ work-life balance.** As the US begins to allow its primary and secondary students to take [mental health days](#) off from school, institutions can follow suit by accepting mental health days as excused absences, scheduling one or two campus-wide mental health days per semester or academic year, and updating attendance policies to ensure that students have the flexibility to fulfill non-academic responsibilities in addition to their coursework. According to Fleming, this is crucial to encourage students to take much-needed breaks and time away from work and accrued stress, especially for remote students, who he argues are struggling even more with designating time to be away from their work in the absence of in-person classes. “There is a need for breaks and perspectives, and that’s what classes offered,” he says. “They allowed you—forced you—to take a break and chat with the people who were in the same class. But with remote learning, there’s no chance to have someone else intrude your thoughts and offer you another perspective or take your mind off work.”
- **Providing practical support.** In addition to updating policies around attendance, institutions can consider updating the benefits, resources, and services that students have access to after they enroll. Additional benefits that institutions have started to provide include [on-site childcare](#) or partnerships with external providers, recognizing that a growing number of students are also parents or caregivers. In response to the [increasing rates of food and housing insecurity](#) among post-secondary students, institutions have also begun to distribute [emergency student aid](#) to help students cover necessary or unexpected expenses, such as food, utilities, or medical bills. According to a [recent study](#) conducted by Compton College, students who received emergency grants in the amount of \$250 were found to be twice as likely to graduate than students who had received no funding, demonstrating the substantial impact that practical support can have on students’ stress-management and work-life balance.
- **Building better brand awareness for campus services, resources, and programs.** Finally, the most important thing that Fleming believes more institutions need to prioritize is raising better awareness of the services, resources, and programs students have access to on and off campus. “Mental health advice is forgotten until its needed very badly,” he admits, arguing, “it’s not enough to offer courses, training during orientation, or even access to one-on-one support, but rather, institutions need to constantly promote these services in order to encourage students to use them.” He insists that institutions need to look beyond supporting

first-year and freshmen students, and consider how they can increase service utilization rates among all students, arguing that most students are likely to forget the information they receive during orientation and first-year events. “You don’t remember something until you need it, and then unless you’ve been seeing it around and been reminded of it you don’t know that’s the thing that you need. So, what’s needed is brand awareness; continuing to remind students about a service, the value of the service, and how to access it.”