



# Academic time during college: Associations with mood, tiredness, and binge drinking across days and semesters



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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the amount of time American college students spent on academics and explored whether functioning indicators (i.e., positive affect, negative affect, tiredness, and binge drinking) rose and fell with academic time across days and semesters. College students ( $N = 735$ ) were followed longitudinally and completed 14 daily diaries within each of 7 semesters ( $N = 56,699$  days). The results revealed that academic time decreased slightly during the middle semesters and then increased in later semesters. Furthermore, on days when students spent more time on academics, they reported less positive affect, more tiredness, and less binge drinking; however, the strength and direction of associations depended on the analysis level and whether it was a weekend. Positive affect, for instance, was inversely associated with academics across days, but the reverse was true across semesters. These results emphasize the importance of considering the temporal context in research on adolescent and young adult time use.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past 40 years, the time use of college students<sup>1</sup> has changed dramatically. Contemporary college students spend much less time studying and more time on leisure activities and paid employment than students in prior decades (Babcock & Marks, 2010). These trends have caused some to lament the state of higher education today, arguing that students today are unmotivated, spend too little time on academics (Arum & Roksa, 2011), and are unprepared to successfully become contributing members of adult society. Yet, the educational and economic contexts facing Millennials (born 1980–2000) are unique. Millennials are more likely to attend college, accumulate educational debt, and encounter international job competition than prior generations (Levenson, 2010). In the face of this changing reality, it is unclear how much time Millennial students *should* be spending on academics in order to maximize their current and future well-being.

Guided by an ecological framework that draws attention to everyday activities and the contexts in which they occur (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the current study documents the trajectory and correlates of time spent on academics among a sample of US college students. Because college students determine their own course schedules and choose whether

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, we use the American description “college students” to refer to individuals pursuing an undergraduate post-secondary degree; however, we recognize that in many countries this population is referred to as “university students.”

to attend class, their academic time is largely discretionary and may vary dramatically across days and semesters. Furthermore, as adolescents transition into adulthood, they gain autonomy and begin establishing adult health behaviors and lifestyles making it important to understand how they spend their time and the consequences of this time use.

### 1.1. Daily fluctuations and the developmental course of academic time

The college years are a dynamic time period characterized by changing academic and social environments. Although most of the research exploring time use among adolescents and young adults has focused on differences between students (e.g., Brint & Cantwell, 2010; Mortenson, 2011; Wight, Price, Bianchi, & Hunt, 2009), there are compelling reasons to examine within-person variation and identify *when* students increase or decrease the amount of time they spend on schoolwork. Changing employment statuses, course loads, and residential locations are just a few examples of the myriad time-varying factors that may impact college students' academic time. Prior work has shown that older students and those in their final year of college spend more time on academics than younger students and those just beginning higher education (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012) highlighting the need for research examining changes in academic time across shorter and longer time frames. In the current study, we examined changes in time spent on schoolwork and we hypothesized that students would spend more time on academics on (a) weekdays and (b) as they progressed through college.

### 1.2. Functioning correlates of academic time

The amount of time that students spend studying and attending class may have long-term consequences for educational achievement, labor market success, and health. In the current study, we sought to understand whether shorter-term psychological and physical health states and behaviors would rise and fall with fluctuations in academic time. Because of our interest in daily associations, we operationalized functioning with four indices that have been shown to fluctuate across days within individuals: positive affect, negative affect, tiredness, and binge drinking (Del Boca, Darkes, Greenbaum, & Goldman, 2004; Fuligni & Hardway, 2006; Röcke, Li, & Smith, 2009). These indicators are not only appropriate for studying short-term changes, but they have been linked to critical health markers and success during adulthood. For instance, mood has been linked to prosocial behavior, relationship quality, and labor market success (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) and rates of disturbed sleep are high among college students (Lund, Reider, Whiting, & Prichard, 2010) highlighting the importance of examining feelings of tiredness and sleepiness. Finally, binge drinking is of interest given that binge drinkers are less likely to complete college and have worse labor market outcomes than those who do not binge drink (Jennison, 2004). Furthermore, alcohol use is a leading contributor to disability and death globally (Lim et al., 2012). Taken together, these variables capture salient aspects of college students' daily experience that have implications for well-being during adolescence and young adulthood.

College students' state of health on a particular day may depend on their class attendance and study time. Schoolwork requires mental effort that may impact students' mood or energy levels. Mental effort can deplete cognitive resources which in turn can lead to changes in physical health states (e.g., tiredness) and psychological states (e.g., negative moods) (Robert & Hockey, 1997). Supporting this idea, research with early and mid-adolescents has shown that homework and school-related activities are less enjoyable than most other activities (Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Academic time may also shape daily functioning by limiting time available for healthy behaviors. The time availability perspective (also known as the "time trade-off" perspective) posits that time is finite and therefore increasing time in any particular activity will reduce time in other domains (Safron, Schulenberg, & Bachman, 2001). For instance, schoolwork may reduce time available for sleep, resulting in more tiredness and fatigue. In line with this theory, previous research has shown that high school and college students sacrifice sleep for studying (Galambos, Dalton, & Maggs, 2009; Gillen-O'Neel, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2013). Of course, when students have more schoolwork, they may also have less time for other activities such as attending parties and socializing with friends, potentially reducing the likelihood of binge drinking. In line with this proposition, one study found that college students with Friday morning classes drank less alcohol on Thursdays than those without Friday classes (Wood, Sher, & Rutledge, 2007). Guided by the time availability theory and previous literature, we hypothesized that on days when students spent more time on academics, they would report (a) worse moods, (b) more tiredness, and (c) less binge drinking.

Rises and falls in academic time *across semesters* may likewise shape the functioning of college students. The semester-level associations may follow the same pattern as the daily associations because the previously discussed underlying mechanisms may be the same. However, it may be that the associations between academic time and functioning differ depending on the time frame being studied. One reason is that the theoretical constructs measured by the daily and semester indices of academic time may differ. At the daily level, fluctuations across days in academic time may be an acute response to an immediate deadline such as writing a paper or studying the night before a test. In contrast, spending long hours on academics in a given semester may indicate a student's broader commitment to studying and schoolwork in that semester. Thus, whereas cramming for a test might result in a temporarily worse mood, spending more time on classwork in a semester might capture engagement in coursework and thus be linked to more positive affect. Another reason why the daily and semester associations might not follow the same pattern is that the time trade-off theory may be less applicable at the semester level because students can balance activities across days. In other words, students could spend long hours studying one day and binge drink the following day. Thus, there might not be an association between the two activities because

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