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ARE STUDENTS WHO WORK AND WORKERS WHO GO TO SCHOOL DIFFERENT? COMPARING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

The escalating costs of postsecondary education for college students have resulted in a situation in which more than 50 percent of the students currently enrolled in colleges and universities are also working. While the educational literature reveals that there has been ongoing research on whether working affects academic attitudes and performance, there is little research on the consequences of studying on work attitudes and performance. The research project reported here uses an Organizational Commitment scale to compare the work attitudes of full-time students who work part-time and full-time workers who attend school part-time. The results reveal that although the Moral Commitment of full-time employees who are attending school is higher than the Moral Commitment of full-time students who are working, the absolute levels of both Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment are indicative of a lack of commitment to the organization for both groups. The implications for research and practice are discussed.

As more people in the United States are attending school and working at the same time, employers and educational institutions need to identify and investigate the outcomes of engaging in both these activities at the same time. What effect does attending school while holding a job have on work performance? What effect does working while attending school have on learning? If studying and working at the same time has a negative effect on either or both of these activities, then both

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employers and educational institutions may need to change so that any negative effects are mitigated or alleviated.

There is no question that high school graduates are attending college in greater numbers now than at any time in the past. Berkner and Chavez reported that more than 90 percent of all high school graduates plan to attend college [1]. If asked to explain why attending college is important, most students would respond that the more education one has, the easier it is to find a job and the more money one is likely to earn; and the work-participation rates published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) support the students' beliefs [2]. The work participation rates of high school graduates with no college is approximately 63 percent. The participation rates for high school graduates with some college is approximately 72 percent and the work participation rates of college graduates is approximately 78 percent.

There is also no question that employers increasingly expect that the people they hire will have postsecondary credentials. If asked to explain why educational achievement is used to select workers to hire, employers will respond that the more education one has, the more productive a worker is—a conclusion also supported by research [3, 4].

All available statistics clearly demonstrate that many students are combining attending school and working in order to earn a college degree without incurring life-long debt [5-9]. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were approximately 10 million full-time undergraduate college students in October, 2003 [10]. Of these full-time students, 35.2 percent worked part-time and 14.6 percent worked full-time. In October, 2005, the BLS reported that 44.3 percent of full-time undergraduates were either working or looking for work and that 79 percent of part-time undergraduates were either working or looking for work [11].

The project reported in this article compares the organizational commitment of two different categories of people who are both working and attending school. It uses the language developed by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) to delineate the two groups [12]. NCES uses the terminology *students who work* to describe individuals whose primary focus is earning a degree and whose primary reason for working is to earn money to meet educational expenses. The term used to describe individuals whose primary focus is their employment activity and whose primary reason for enrolling in college is to enhance their employment status is *employees who study*. Berker and Horn stated that *students who work* are usually full-time students and part-time workers, and *employees who study* are usually full-time workers and part-time students [13].

The increasing number of people who are combining earning a postsecondary degree and earning a living indicates that investigations of whether the two activities reinforce each other, are compatible with each other, or interfere with each other need to be conducted. Identifying workplace differences between students who work and employees who study is necessary so that employers can modify the organization's policies and structures to use both groups effectively and so that educational institutions can modify their policies and structures to ensure that both

groups learn. The study reported in this article focuses on identifying differences in the Organizational Commitment of students who work and workers who study.

BACKGROUND

To locate as many research studies as possible that focus on the topic of combining employment and education, searches were conducted in the business and the educational literature. A review of the educational literature revealed that the majority of studies in that field focus on the consequences of working on studying. A review of the business literature revealed only a few studies of the consequences of studying on working. A brief review of both sets of studies is presented below.

Educators commonly assume that working has a negative effect on academic performance. However, after analyzing the existing literature, Henke, Lyons, and Krachenberg concluded that this assumption is not supported [14]. The authors concluded that "in spite of seven decades of extensive investigative efforts, there is definitely no consensus of opinion and little convergence of research evidence regarding the effects of working for pay on academic performance" [14, p 192]. Other and more recent studies indicate that working does not have a negative effect on learning. Nonis and Hudson investigated the relationship between hours spent working and academic performance using a sample of undergraduate business students attending an accredited public university; and they reported no significant relationship between time spent working and grade-point average [6]. Lundberg investigated the relationship between working and learning using a national database of undergraduates and reported that although working prevents students from participating in nonclassroom educational activities, working does not hinder learning [15]. No studies that examined the effects of studying on work performance could be located in the educational literature.

In reviewing the business literature, the author found only three studies in which the topic of balancing working and studying was discussed. Each of these studies are reviewed here. Although none of the articles specifically examined differences between the organizational commitment of students who work and employees who study, each of the studies supported the need to study the challenges for workers who are trying to combine work and school and/or demonstrated that differences exist among the categories of individuals who are trying to combine work and education.

Mayfield and Mayfield used a mixed sample of graduate and undergraduate business students and members of a professional business organization to investigate how the language used by leaders motivates work performance [16]. They reported that the effect of having leaders use motivating language is significantly and positively related to the job satisfaction and work performance of full-time workers and to the job satisfaction of part-time workers. However, the use of motivating language had no effect on the work performance of part-time workers. Since the researchers did not categorize the members of their sample as students

who work or workers who study, the primary contribution of the results is the indication that there may be differences between these two groups and that studies which identify the two groups should be conducted.

Fram and Bonvillian stated that both the work performance and the academic performance of individuals trying to work and study is affected by trying to do both at the same time [17]. The authors identified the sources of stressors that emerged from both activities, theorized that employers and educational institutions may be inadvertently sabotaging both present and future productivity by not recognizing and adjusting to the challenges and difficulties faced by these worker/students and made a number of recommendations that both employers and educational institutions could adopt to help these individuals complete both tasks successfully [17].

Sinclair, Martin, and Michel specifically identified students as a subgroup of parttime workers in their study of differences in Organizational Commitment [18]. Their sample of unionized retail employees included full-time workers and four subgroups of part-time workers: 1) workers for whom the part-time job was a second job; 2) students who were currently enrolled in college; 3) married workers for whom the part-time job provided less than 50 percent of the total family income; and 4) workers for whom the part-time job provided more than 50 percent of the family income. The results indicated that students had significantly lower levels of organizational commitment than the other three types of part-time workers but that there was no difference between the organizational commitment of students and full-time workers [18]. Because the data were collected in 1983 and the categories of part-time workers were not mutually exclusive, the results could not be generalized to the population of workers in 2007. However, again, the results indicated that students who work may be different from other groups of workers.

The objective of the research project reported here contributes to our knowledge of the interaction of working and attending college by comparing the Organizational Commitment of *students who work* and *employees who study*. Organizational Commitment was chosen because this study represents one of the first efforts to investigate the interaction of working and studying on workplace attitudes, and a rich stream of theoretical and empirical research has identified Organizational Commitment as one of the primary antecedents of workforce behaviors. These behaviors include time and effort spent on the job [19], organizational citizenship behavior [20-22], overall job performance [23], turnover [24, 25]; and intent to stay with the organization [25, 26].

METHODOLOGY

Definitions and Measurements

Work and Student Status Categories

For the purposes of this study, *students who work* are individuals who are full-time undergraduate students and are working part-time. *Employees who*

study are individuals who are part-time undergraduate students and are working full-time.

Organizational Commitment

The study reported here is based on the Organizational Commitment concept developed by Etzioni [27] and operationalized by Penley and Gould [28]. Etzioni conceptualized that Organizational Commitment identifies the underlying reason why employees perform the work they are assigned by their supervisors/superiors [27]. He postulated three dimensions of Organizational Commitment. Employees who follow the directives of their supervisors and perform their work because they identify with the goals of the organization and want the organization to be successful are described as acting from *Moral Commitment*. Employees who follow the directives of their supervisors and perform their work only because they do not want to be fired are acting from *Alienative Commitment*. Employees who follow the directives in exchange for the economic benefits received from the organization are acting from *Economic Commitment* [27]. Penley and Gould constructed and tested five-item scales to test Etzioni's model [28]. Harris-Pereles provided support for Etzioni's theory by demonstrating that Moral Commitment predicted a significantly higher level of discretionary work behaviors than either Alienative or Economic Commitment [20].

The Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment scales used in this project are taken from the Penley and Gould study that operationalized and tested the reliability of the Etzioni construct and dimensions [28]. The Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment scales contain five items from Penley and Gould and use a Likert-type ranking with answers ranging from strong disagreement (1) to strong agreement (6). There are no "neutral" or "not applicable" selection options. Examples of the items include: "It is my personal responsibility to help my organization achieve success (Moral Commitment)." "I am dedicated to my organization (Moral Commitment)." "Sometimes I would like to walk out of my organization and never come back (Alienative Commitment)." "I feel trapped in my job (Alienative Commitment)." The Economic Exchange Commitment Scale contained four of Penley and Gould's five items. Examples of the items include: "I adjust my efforts at work to the pay I get (Economic Exchange Commitment)." And "I give my organization a day's work for a day's wages (Economic Exchange Commitment)."

Hypotheses

Moral Commitment

Moral Commitment is a connection with the organization based on a personal dedication to the success of the organization. It can include elements of identification with the organization, internalization of organizational goals, loyalty, or a desire to be affiliated with the organization [22, 27, 29-30]. It could

reasonably be posited that those workers 1) who value and accept the goals of the organization, 2) who value the work being done by the organization, or 3) who have a stable relationship with the organization will have higher levels of Moral Commitment than workers who do not have these characteristics. Although it is possible that part-time workers could have a high level of Moral Commitment, it seems probable that higher levels of Moral Commitment will be found in those groups of workers who have the desire to maintain and/or advance within the employing organization. Therefore. the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. *Employees who study* will have higher levels of Moral Commitment than *students who work*.

Alienative Commitment

Alienative Commitment is the result of being dissatisfied, angry, or unhappy about one's work situation but being unable to leave. Therefore, it seems reasonable that those workers who need the rewards and benefits which accrue from continuing to work for the employing organization and who perceive no other reasonable alternatives to gain these rewards and benefits will rank higher in Alienative Commitment than workers who do perceive other alternatives. Alienative Commitment would be high in workers who have few other opportunities for earning income, whereas workers who have other income-generating opportunities would probably change jobs or positions rather than remain in an unsatisfying situation.

However, in this particular situation, it is possible to theorize that both students who work and employees who study could have high levels of Alienative Commitment. For a student who works, it may be necessary to accept a particular job because it is available or because it has a high level of pay but which the student does not want or enjoy, or it may be necessary to accept a job on the basis of its location whether the student wants or enjoys the job or not. In either situation, Alienative Commitment would be high. For employees who study, Alienative Commitment may be high because the employee believes that s/he must remain in a job which provides tuition reimbursement but which does not provide job satisfaction. There is also the possibility that a student who works will find a job which is very satisfying and the possibility that the employee who studies has a job which provides high levels of job satisfaction. The following hypothesis is proposed based on the assumption of the author that employees who study have more options for satisfying alternative employment than students who work:

Hypothesis 2: Students who work will have higher levels of Alienative Commitment than employees who study.

Economic Exchange Commitment

All workers recognize that they are exchanging their resources for the economic rewards received from the organization; and there is a long standing belief among researchers that this expectation of reward evokes a commitment to the organization [22, 27, 31-33]. Because the literature clearly demonstrates that many *students who work* work primarily to earn money for educational expenses [5, 7-9] and because the NCES [12] explicitly differentiates students who work from employees who study based on the element of whether the student is working primarily to pay for educational expenses or the employee is studying for purposes of career advancement, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Students who work will have higher levels of Economic Exchange Commitment than employees who study.

Sample

Data to test the hypotheses were collected from undergraduate business students attending a midsize AACSB-accredited public university in the eastern seaboard region of the United States. The data was collected over a period of four semesters in the first week of an Organizational Behavior course. Organizational Behavior is a required course for all business students. During each semester, six sections of the course were offered, and between twenty-two and twenty-five students were enrolled in each section. The course is usually taken during a student's junior year. A survey questionnaire, including items to identify the work and student status of each respondent, to measure the three types of commitment, and to collect demographic information, was distributed to each student during her/his regularly scheduled class period. Anonymity was preserved by having the faculty member leave the room during the time when the surveys were being completed and having a student turn in the completed questionnaires to the departmental secretary with no identifying marks on the surveys. After the surveys had been completed by all sections, the departmental secretary gave all of the surveys to the author.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Five hundred and twenty-nine surveys were returned which is a return rate of between 87 percent and 100 percent of the students to whom the surveys were distributed. Analyzed by time period, 136 surveys were returned in the first time period, 140 during the second time period, 113 during the third time period, and 140 during the fourth time period. Three hundred and seventy usable surveys were returned from 276 *students who work* and 94 *employees who study*. One hundred and fifty-nine surveys from the original sample were unusable: 93 surveys were returned by students who were not working, and 69 surveys were returned by students who did not indicate their work and/or student status. Table 1 displays the

Table 1. Description of Survey Participants by Time Period of Data Collection

Surveys returned by work and student status and time period	Students who work	Employees who study	Females	Males	Age: % of Respondents between 18 and 20 yrs old
Time period 1	75	25	74	60	61%
Time period 2	76	24	74	64	74%
Time period 3	52	22	53	59	65%
Time period 4	73	23	64	79	72%

usable surveys by work and student status, gender, age, and time period. Since there were no significant differences between the respondents in the four time periods, the data were analyzed as a whole.

Principal components analysis with a promax (oblique) process was used to test for conceptual distinctness and factor reliability of the commitment dimensions. An oblique rotation process is recommended if the factors may be theoretically correlated [34]. Four factors were identified in the principal components analysis of the entire sample; however, only two factors met acceptable decision criteria and were retained for further analysis. Using the decision criteria 1) that the items loading onto each factor be conceptually related; 2) that eigenvalues for retained factors should be greater than 1.00; 3) that any factor retained for further analysis should contain at least three items which only load onto that component [34]; and 4) that only items which have a loading factor of .400 or greater should be included in scale construction [35], two factors could be identified. Table 2 presents the loading weight for each item that met the decision criteria.

Factor 1 (Items 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8) corresponds to the Moral Commitment factor identified by Etzioni [27] and Penley and Gould [28]. Cronbach's alpha is .792 for the entire sample; .812 for students who work; and .741 for employees who study. Factor 2 (Items 1, 2, 6, 9, and 10) corresponds to the Alienative Commitment factor identified by Etzioni and Penley and Gould Cronbach's alpha is .712 for the entire sample; .718 for students who work; and .693 for employees who study. These results demonstrate that Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment are reliable for all groups and therefore can be analyzed for significant differences using an independent samples *t*-test [36].

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and the Pearson correlation matrix for Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment, and Table 4 compares the levels of Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment of the two groups. When reading Tables 3 and 4, it is important to remember that a score of 1 indicates *strong disagreement* with the statement, a score of 2 indicates *moderate disagreement*, and a score of 3 indicates *slight disagreement*.

Tabel 2. Item Loadings: Commitment Components

	F1	F2
1. I get angry when I think about my job.	–.01	.82
2. No matter what I do, my organization doesn't change	–.25	.44
3. It is my personal responsibility to help my organization achieve success.	.69	.08
4. I get upset when people say bad things about my organization.	.78	.02
5. I am dedicated to my organization.	.73	–.04
6. Sometimes I would like to walk off my job and never return.	–.10	.70
7. I feel it my duty to support my organization.	.82	.08
8. Whenever I am in public, I think of myself as an employee of my organization.	.66	.02
9. I often want to "get even" with my employer for the way I'm treated on the job.	.10	.61
10. I feel trapped in my job.	.14	.77

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics (N = 370)

Variable	Alpha	Mean	Std Dev	Moral Commitment	Alienative Commitment
Moral Commitment	.792	2.90	.83	1	
Alienative Commitment	.712	1.77	.71	–.450**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

Table 4. Comparison of Students Who Work and Employees Who Study

Group	N =	Moral Commitment**	N =	Alienative Commitment
Students who work	271	2.83	274	1.77
Employees who study	91	3.11	92	1.78

Note: ** Difference is significant at the .01 level.

Table 4 presents the results of the independent *t*-test comparing the Moral Commitment and Alienative Commitment of employees who study and students who work. The Moral Commitment of employees who study is significantly higher than the Moral Commitment of students who work; and therefore, Hypothesis 1 must be accepted. There were no significant differences between the levels of Alienative Commitment of employees who study and students who work; and

therefore Hypothesis 2 must be rejected. The fact that no reliable scale measuring Economic Exchange Commitment could be developed means that Hypothesis 3 cannot be addressed.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the research reported here is to identify any differences between the Organizational Commitment of students who work and employees who study and to discuss the implications of any differences for employers. However, although the results indicate that the Moral Commitment of employees who study is higher than the Moral Commitment of students who work and that there is no difference in the Alienative Commitment of the groups, the interpretation of these results is challenging because the absolute levels of the each dimension of Organizational Commitment appear to indicate that neither group has strong feelings about the organizations for which they work.

When considering Moral Commitment, the mean for students who work is 2.83. This score indicates that this group falls between moderate *disagreement* and slight *disagreement* with the statements that measure the Moral Commitment dimension of Organizational Commitment. The mean for the employees who study is higher at 3.11 but that score *still does not rise to the level of agreement with the statements* measuring the Moral Organizational dimension of Organizational Commitment. The Likert ranking used in the survey ranged from strong disagreement (indicated by the number 1) to strong agreement (indicated by the number 6). Using that scale, any mean greater than 3.50 would indicate agreement with the statements but any mean lower than 3.50 would indicate disagreement with the statement. Extrapolating these results would appear to indicate that neither group of workers feels a sense of personal responsibility for the success of the organization and therefore does not follow supervisors' directives as a result of dedication to the organization.

However, an examination of the levels of Alienative Commitment does not appear to indicate that either group in the sample is alienated from the organizations for which it works. The mean for students who work is 1.78. This score indicates that this group falls between strong *disagreement* and moderate *disagreement* with the statements which measure the level of dissatisfaction and/or anger about one's work situation combined with an inability to leave the job. The mean for employees who study is 1.77, a score which also indicates disagreement with the statements. Extrapolating these results would appear to indicate that neither group of workers feels trapped in their jobs and therefore does not follow supervisors' directives because the workers are afraid of being fired.

So, how can these results be interpreted and used by employing organizations?

When trying to interpret the results of low levels of either type of Organizational Commitment from both groups, the author generated one possible theory. It is

possible that both groups have decided that the jobs they currently hold are temporary. Having made that decision, the worker/students then perform on the job at a level they perceive to be adequate, focus on their educational activities, and think about the (better) jobs they will have after completing their education. Since they plan to seek other work after earning their baccalaureate degrees, they neither have any reason to develop a strong relationship with the organizations for which they work nor do they feel trapped in these jobs.

However, being able to conclude that either of these two groups followed supervisory directives and performed their work as a result of either Moral Commitment or Alienative Commitment, leaves unanswered the question of "How can organizations influence worker compliance with supervisory directions and work performance standards for these two groups of workers?"

Finding answers for this question will require additional research to identify the factors that motivate these work groups to comply with supervisory directives and to perform. Perhaps the organizational characteristics that evoke commitment and performance from individuals who are working and studying are different from the organizational characteristics that evoke commitment from workers who are not attending school. Exploratory research using open-ended questions to identify the factors that motivate each group, followed by research focused on the commitment and performance levels, could identify the more effective factors.

For example, if employees who study are seeking career advancement within the organization for which they work while attending school, perhaps tuition remission benefits, flexible work schedules, paid study time at work, promotion or pay opportunities based on intermediate educational achievements are factors that would evoke commitment and performance.

If students who work are seeking cash income to pay for their education, perhaps organizations should focus on creating flexible compensation systems by which this group of workers can maximize take-home pay and minimize the time spent working. An example would be a compensation system in which an employee is paid by the job completed. The faster the employee stocked the shelves, mowed the golf course, or generated a predetermined level of sales from customers, the sooner the employee would be able to leave the worksite and engage in his/her studies. Another idea for this group would be that organizations collaborate with educational institutions to develop internships in which the work the organization needs to have done is explicitly connected to the degree that the student is earning. If students who work perceive that the work they do is concretely relevant to their degree content and/or they earn college credit for the work they are doing, the students might be motivated to perform that work at a higher level.

In addition to research based on identifying the factors that influence higher levels of commitment and performance from employees who study and students who work, researchers should also compare workers who are engaged in both employment and educational activities to workers who are engaged only in

employment activities. It is possible that organizational commitment as it is currently conceptualized and operationalized no longer evokes performance from any group of workers.

In summary, the research reported here has implications for academic research and for management practice. First, the results clearly support Feldman's recommendation that studies of workplace attitudes and behaviors should describe the participants using more than one dimension [37]. Based on the results reported here, studies of attitudes and performance should include the demographic characteristics that delineate workers with different combinations of working and studying. Second, the assumption that managers can rely on the various dimensions of organizational commitment to evoke work behaviors needs to be retested for generalizability to those workers who are either employees who study or students who work. If organizational commitment does not evoke the desired level of work performance from these two groups, then organizations must generate other strategies that do. Several different strategies are described in this report.

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