

**A Balancing Game: The Phenomenological Study of Students Experiencing 20+ Hours of
Non-Academic Obligations**

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Abstract

Obligations such as work and sports present university students with various drawbacks and other effects in terms of changes to their lifestyle, academic performance, and well-being. This raises concerns on why aspects like these don't turn out as favorable for students, and raises our interest in revealing the student experiences that lay behind this question. Our findings showed that across the board, regardless of obligation, students displayed higher levels of exhaustion when their obligations became heavy, often losing sleep as a result. In general, and also when experiencing these periods of exhaustion, students were found making mental shifts and lifestyle changes to accommodate these drawbacks. Adjustments to their schedule were made along with limitations to students' social life. On the contrary, when the opportunity presented itself, socialness was used as a method of enhancing student's well-being and motivation with school, helping them maintain a balance through non-school related activities. Overall, students described the shared experience of feeling frustrated and exhausted, yet maintained a resilient demeanor when faced with challenges that came with the management of their obligations. This research is significant because it reveals the realities students are involved in when balancing their academic responsibilities and non-academic demands.

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Currently, millions of college students experience a hindrance to academic performance due to the demands of balancing outside commitments with their studies. If there is not a more nuanced understanding of this, the future can be very dangerous for college students as it already shows numerous negative effects. This is a growing concern as Curtis & Shania (2002) discovered that 55 percent of college students are working. Additionally, Ecton et al. (2023) explains that working college students are 20 percent more likely not to finish their degree compared to their peers who do not work a job. Sockin (2021) states that working college students have statistically significantly lower GPAs than non-working students. The American College of Sports Medicine (2021) explains that some college students' jobs involve moving around a lot and time-consuming activities, so they tend to suffer from social isolation. This negatively affects their mental health as they do not have time to hang out with friends and engage in social activities. Kawamoto (2018) discovers that 67 percent of college students feel isolated and alone. Furthermore, the American College of Sports Medicine found that 30 percent of female college athletes experience anxiety, while 25 percent of male athletes experience anxiety.

College student's mental health is plummeting. Santos et al. (2020) found that 45 percent of college athletes suffer from sleep problems because of their jam-packed schedules. This lack of sleep hinders their ability to focus on lectures and exams. Time-consuming activities like working a job or being a college athlete are very harsh on college students' mental health and hinders their performance levels. It is something that needs to be taken seriously; Kawamoto (2018) discovers that 26 percent of college students think about committing suicide.

Additionally, college students with financial stress are put into the at-risk groups, with 37 to 40 percent having suicidal thoughts.

Because of the constant internal struggle many students face with finding a way to divide their focus between school and work, many detriments can be observed, such as a decline in grades, lower social involvement, and a diminishing state of mental health. When speaking in terms of overall performance in school, Lucero et al. (2022)'s study regarding student employment and GPA reflection shows that, on average, students who are in fact employed during their terms in school reflect a generally lower grade point average than their unemployed counterparts. Noting the correlation between a student's employment status and their academic performance can also be tied to their own strength in identity within their varying environments, with students identifying with a stronger sense of belonging accruing higher grades and better performance (Knott, 2016).

One of the most glaring holes in research conducted on this phenomenon of students experiencing 20+ hours of non-academic obligation would be the involvement of employed students and student athletes in extracurricular activities pertaining to their classes and their trends of attending versus skipping out on classes during the week. Being able to more thoroughly examine the interpersonal and intrapersonal effects of student employment alike requires an in-dept of the easily seen impacts such as performance as well as unseen effects on mental health and a student's own drive for productivity. Once a complete look into the issue presented can be conducted, the proper resources and efforts can be allocated to assist both the students struggling with the work and school-life balance and professors to be able to grant certain forms of amnesty or guardrails in navigating through these waters.

The study will expand on existing information, and approach the experience of balancing academic and non-academic obligation by examining the personal perspectives of college students, specifically through a qualitative lens. By focusing on these particular experiences of student's managing at least 20 hours of non-academic commitments, one can gain further understanding of the pertinent factors like personal identity, mental health, and academic performance, and how that influence reflects itself amongst students. The study will look into the ways students manage and cope with such obligations, view their own identities, and how their academic success is affected by using transcendental phenomenology as the basis for the analysis. Information were collected from six participants who manage a minimum of 20 hours of non-academic commitments a week. The data is collected through in-depth interviews performed on each participant, where they will get to express their perspectives on how these responsibilities influence factors such as the ones mentioned before, those being personal identity, mental health, and academic performance. A more nuanced understanding of balancing academic and non-academic obligations could significantly improve college students' levels of success and decrease the mental health issues college students face. This study will provide additional resources and a diverse perspective to students and educators alike to navigate the school and work-life balance better.

Literature Review

In order to fully understand the essence of the experience it is essential to first understand the theories that will be analyzed and previous research that has been conducted.

Impacts of the Identity and Social Identity Theory

The identity and social identity theory are critical to understanding how college students' performance levels are affected, and the theories are used as the methodology to measure the

results in a quantitative method. Identity theory can be used to describe the question of who am I? As Stets and Burke (2020) explain, identity is developed from self-categorization and identification. Social identity theory focuses on the identities one takes on as a result of being a part of a social group or an institution. Both of these theories play hand in hand with each other. The more one is involved with a social group, the role they hold within this group, and their participation levels, the more salient one's social identity is within that social role. Certain roles that maintain power and status level will make the identity more salient. Social identity is not limited to one role; one can have multiple social identities. Alongside, one's identity increases with more motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, which can stem from more salient social roles.

The identity and social identity theory can be seen through the performance of college students and student-athletes. The more central one's identity is to athletics, the better their GPA will be. When a student or student-athlete possesses all the qualities of a strong identity, they are more likely to improve their performance in that specific aspect of life. Additionally, in Knott (2016) research, it was found that the athletes with a stronger sense of athlete identity correlates with a stronger sense of student identity. Student-athletes who are seniors have the strongest sense of student identity but the lowest athlete identity. In contrast, freshmen have the opposite, with the highest athlete identity and second lowest student identity. Juniors had the highest correlation with both identities. Knott also states that when one has a strong sense of identity in oneself or a social role, then one will have a high level of performance in that role. When one of the identities conflicts with another identity, one of the two identities will fail, like traveling for athletic games and missing class. He also argues that females tend to have higher levels of identity, and developing ways to increase male identity is essential.

Impacts on Interorganizational Performance

Having to manage with the responsibilities tied with school, work, or athletics can be difficult. Oftentimes when it becomes too overwhelming, students' grades will suffer. For example, it can be seen that on average students who are employed will have one grade point lower in their GPA when compared to unemployed students (Lucero et al., 2022). This is a significant difference, and really represents the comparison between working and non working students. Similarly, another author discovers that working students have a lower GPA than non students (Logan et al., 2016). It's obvious that working students have a harder time with school, having to manage with a lower grade because of their additional workload. Contrary to this, some researchers suggest strength of student identity is positively correlated with GPA (Knott, 2016). Interestingly, the strength of student identity fluctuates depending on a student's class standing. For example, seniors displayed the highest student identity, while freshmen had the highest athlete identity. This is important to consider because it provides an idea of the development of identities throughout the course of a student's life.

Working students find it difficult to create time with their already filled up schedule, and this lack of additional time creates instances where working students will even have to miss classes and assignments. For example, a study done by Curtis & Shania (2002) found that 22% of students missed class in order to work, with smaller percentages seen when it comes to assignments, where about 9% found themselves turning in assignments late and 4% received a failing grade on assignments. Even though the percentage doesn't reflect a major impact regarding assignments, there still exists the consideration that those students who did turn the work in without issue, might not have put their best work out. It was reported that on average 46% of students feel they would have achieved a better grade if it weren't for them having to

work. This helps reinforce the general idea that working students find it hard to perform at their full potential, whether that be because they miss class or simply don't have the additional time outside of class.

Mental Health Implications

When it comes to the implications of mental health in regards to academic and work-life balancing, there are multifaceted aspects that can affect an individual either negatively or positively in some cases. Notably, Curtis & Shania (2002) mention that every year more and more students feel the need to embark in part-time paid work outside of school even while they have academic obligations in college, with many of these students finding a difficulty coping with the extenuating stress of balancing priorities between different arenas of their life. One glaring aspect of mental health decline in employed students is the introduction of burnout as a result of mental and emotional overload paired with the element of exhaustion and mental overexertion (Rüschoff & Kowalewski, 2024). The feeling of mental and emotional exhaustion is commonly experienced by students who overextend their reach of obligations with little to no time to themselves to unwind and decompress and can lead to a steep decline of performance, social interactions, isolation, and depressive episodes of stagnation, disregarding responsibilities in both academic and nonacademic settings.

In addition to the often suffocating feeling of burnout and exhaustion, Wu et al. (2003) note through their studies that many young school aged individuals, which bleeds over into the college aged individual, are also exposed to various licit and illicit substances and practices that their older coworkers and colleagues may partake in such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or other so called "street" drugs. The introduction of substance use and abuse in students in the workforce only strengthens the grip of declining mental health and productivity with the artificial

alteration of chemicals in the body (Wu et al., 2003). The seemingly inexorable combination of the many factors that employed students face poses the question of how significantly student's mental well-being are influenced by this.

The Current Study

Regardless of existing information, there still are gaps surrounding the topic that our research aims to explore. Older studies like the ones discussed examine the interaction between academic performance and aspects like identity and external obligations, whether that be work or athletics. This is fine; however, they fail to consider the subjective experiences that are part of a busy student lifestyle, mainly focusing on the quantitative measures that dictate performance. Adding to this, much of the prior research takes a narrower approach, not considering what lies at the intersection of identity, mental health, and work-life balance. Lastly, existing literature lacks the recognition of looking at the way students internalize and perceive these experiences. Our study addresses this consideration through its qualitative approach, providing additional resources and a diverse perspective for students and educators alike. Addressing these gaps will provide a greater understanding of what the student work balance entails, paving the road for an improvement in college student's level of success. For these reasons, the study, informed by transcendental phenomenology, will interpret what it means for college students to experience balancing academic and non-academic obligations to attain the essence of their experience by answering the following three guided research questions: 1) How do college students cope with balancing academic obligations and at least 20 hours of non-academic obligations? 2) How do college students perceive their identity personally and interpersonally while experiencing academic obligations and at least 20 hours of non-academic obligations? 3) How do college

students describe the relationship between their academic performance and having 20 hours of non-academic obligations?

Methods

For the directly conducted interviews of participants, we utilized a semi-structured interview method with predetermined questions and an allowable tolerance for freeform followup questions when necessary. Employing the use of a semi-structured interview format allows for a greater understanding of the participant's experience regarding the phenomenon at hand by opening the opportunity to delve deeper into answers provided to previous questions (Knott et al., 2022). In addition to a semi-structured interview structure, the manner of research being conducted was of a qualitative nature, which allowed for the analysis of non-numerical data and narrative driven experiences. As seen in research from Knott et al. and Creswell and Poth (2023), the utilization of interview testimonials offers an invaluable insight to the experience of this phenomenon. Our phenomenon's importance goes back to phenomenology, described by Creswell and Poth as a research method that aims to understand the essence of the shared experience. By looking at multiple participants through an experiential lens, we were able to achieve this goal as researchers. This is done with the intention of learning more about the personal experiences beyond the objective level, while not focusing on any one particular experience. However, instead of studying the individual, we as phenomenological researchers focus on understanding how a phenomenon manifests and appears in the lifeworld (Vagle, 2018).

Participants

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Knott et al. (2022) states this method uses guiding logic to select participants that have the most relevance to the research topic. The criterion sampling method is also used where participants were chosen with a

preexisting knowledge of fitting a required criteria; Creswell and Poth (2023) describe criterion sampling as when interviewers select participants who meet the set criteria. Participants met the set criteria for the interviews if they (a) were a current college student between the ages of 17 and 23; (b) had at least 20 hours of non-academic obligations (paid or unpaid job or college athletics); and (c) were enrolled and attending at least one in-person class at Old Dominion University

The last method used to select participants is maximum variation sampling. Creswell and Poth (2023) explain this is when there are quotas to ensure diversity among participants in order to establish variation. The maximum variation quotas are that (a) four of the participants must be of different ethnicities; (b) there must be three male and three female participants; and (c) four of the participants must be engaged in different non-academic obligations (ex: different jobs, different sports).

The recruitment strategy for our study was to ask students if they know of anyone who meets the set criteria. Creswell and Poth (2023) state that in phenomenological studies, having less than 10 interview participants is not uncommon. The purpose of this study is not to present generalizable findings but to allow a deeper view into the effects of this phenomenon in individuals affected and to provide qualitative research. In this study, six participants were interviewed, consisting of three college athletes and three college students working a part-time job. Three of the participants were male, and the other three were female, all from different ethnicities. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

Name	Gender identity	Racial/Ethnic identity	Age	Credits in-progress	Non-academic obligation
Chloe	Female	White	22	12	Part-time job
Eric	Male	North African	22	15	Part-time job
Bren	Male	African American	23	15	Part-time job
Casey	Female	White	20	13	Athletics
Megan	Female	White	21	15	Athletics
Frank	Male	Puerto Rican/ African American	22	15	Part-time job, Athletics

Research Team

Our research team is composed of three criminal justice majors in the final semester of our terms at Old Dominion University. Two out of the three of us personally experience the phenomenon of working and having out of school obligations while maintaining a student career at ODU. Haven Habhab is currently a student athlete as well on the rowing team at the university. The team consists of two males and one female. With ethnicity ranging from Hispanic, Native American, and Polish, this has helped grant us diverse perspectives on our studies and work alike. As a result of our major requirements, we have all had experience in coursework pertaining to psychology, sociology, and criminological studies which directly

correlate to the research we have conducted. All of our experiences and knowledge in this field have presented us with the opportunity to conduct the research to the best of our ability.

Data Collection

The interviews were performed both on Zoom and physically on campus, in areas that include separate rooms and isolated spaces free from unwanted listeners. This was done to ensure participant confidentiality and comfort. Each interview went on for different durations, with the shortest lasting 24 minutes, the longest lasting 67 minutes, and an average duration of all interviews sitting at 40 minutes. Each interview was recorded using a mix of audio recording and an automated transcription program, ensuring there was thorough documentation of the interviewee's responses. Transcription includes listening back and transcribing from audio recording, along with the assistance of voice to text automatic transcription. Two interviews were conducted per member, totaling to six interviews.

Informed consent was given by participants before interviewing them, ensuring they understood the study's objective and their right to resign from participation at any time. Participants were informed that participation in the study is completely voluntary, and that the interview aims for a target duration of one hour. Extra consideration was taken by acknowledging the potential for sensitive topics to arise given the nature of our study on academic and non-academic obligations. Participants were also informed that their feedback would be both recorded and transcribed. Additionally, a pseudonym was used for all participants for anonymity purposes. If participants felt the need to report any concerns after the interview, each of them was provided contact information where they could express any concerns that may have arisen.

The following primary interview questions were given to participants:

1. To start, can you give me an overall sense of what it has been like for you to balance your academic and non-academic obligations?
2. How has your sense of yourself as a student been impacted by your identity as _____?
3. How has your sense of yourself as a _____ been impacted by your identity as a student?
4. Okay, so we've talked about your identity as a student and your identity as _____. What other identities or roles are important in your life?
5. Could you describe how your obligations impact your academic performance?
6. How has your GPA been impacted?
7. While balancing all your obligations, what lifestyle changes have you had to make?
8. Can you describe your overall mental health while balancing your obligations?
9. What strategies have you used to cope with the pressure of balancing school and your other obligations?

Following these questions, participants were asked to elaborate using a collection of probing questions which allow us to provoke a more thorough answer or for the participant to elaborate further if needed. Each of the primary interview questions were followed up with a minimum of two unique probing questions. On top of this, free probing questions were also used to encourage participants to speak more, along with any on the spot questions that may have arisen at the time

of the interview. Approaching the questions in this way allows for a specific and generalized breakdown of the participants feedback. Demographic information was collected prior to the interview. Our full interview guide can be found in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this research, our phenomenological study maintains an approach guided by Larsen and Adu (2021) to ensure a proper analysis, one that allows us to boil the data down in a way that reaches the essence of the experience. In following their approach, our interest looks beyond the phenomenon itself and instead focuses on how participants process and navigate the experience. As researchers, we aim to review, understand, and describe the thinking acts provided to us by participants. It is these steps that will allow us to attain the meaning of their experience. Each researcher was responsible for creating codes that revolved around their assigned secondary research question, making it one secondary research question per person, essentially allowing us as researchers to hone our focus even further.

Our descriptive coding process began with selecting portions of the conducted interviews that reflect our secondary research questions. After doing so, each portion is identified with a code, or label, that accurately captures what the participant said without changing the meaning through interpretation or judgment. Codes specifically followed a structure that described participants' excerpts through action words ending in “ing”, and codes were adjusted as necessary whether they had to be renamed, contained too much similarity to other codes, or were too broad.

With these codes completed, they were collected, organized and developed into themes. The organization process was determined by grouping related codes with one another, and

placing them under a name or title representative of their shared relationship. Similar to the codes, these titles were brief and followed a structure that used action or “ing” words, maintaining a descriptive nature rather than an interpretive one. With the emerging themes in place, we then went into the development of essential themes. Essential themes were analyzed through a lens of imaginative variation, a term described as looking at the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, which was made possible by examining the number of participants represented within each theme. In doing so we were left with data that permitted us to record findings in a manner that captured a common account across all participants. Each theme was further examined and filtered through based on if they met certain conditions, with the conditions being that at least half of the participants fell under each theme, as well as ensuring sufficient variation across participants which we did by splitting it proportionally across men and women.

We wrote a thematic memo for each essential theme, which contained an explanation for why a given theme had its respective collection of codes. Additionally, the thought process behind the naming of the theme was included, along with five excerpts or quotes drawn from multiple participants and multiple codes. Reasoning behind the inclusion of each excerpt was explained, and after all memos were in place, a final discussion on the understanding of how the theme is related to both the research question and other themes. With this, we looked at each secondary research question in order to bring us closer to the essence of the experience. We did so by revisiting the essential themes and considering the meaning and representation held by each one. Then, a comparison was done through the creation of a table, illustrating the relationships shared by the essential themes. Finally, a written statement describing the relationships was done, ultimately describing the shared experience of our participants.

Findings

We set out to understand the essence of what it is like for a college student to balance academics and 20 hours of nonacademic obligations. In order to fully understand the essence of the experience, we had to look at it from an academic, identity, and mental health perspective. This section provides a diverse perspective as it also draws many key findings. Through the participants' experiences, one will learn how obligations affect academics and the steps people commonly use to create balance. We also present findings on what leads to the development of identity and causes an identity change. Lastly, we present findings on the support systems, time management, and resilience one develops. The findings are essential to future research, policies, and development strategies geared towards increasing students' academic performance.

Impact on Academics

In this section, we analyze the research findings, exploring how college students describe the impact of their obligations on their academics. Emphasis is placed on how grades and health were affected. This theme is extremely important to understanding the overall essence of college students' experience with academic performance.

Experiencing Negative Effects on Academics

From balancing their obligations, the majority of participants experienced negative effects on academics. This was seen in ways such as lower grades, lower GPA, working too much, focusing too much on athletics, and finding it difficult to balance both. This also is a strong theme, as every gender and race was represented. Bren states:

Starting on my freshman year, my GPA was a 3.6 and with working the job and the after school activities I was doing, it really brought my grade down, my GPA down...So currently, right now, I'm at a 2.73.

When Bren was asked about how his GPA was impacted by non academic obligations he explained his GPA dropped almost a whole letter grade. Majority of participants also experienced this. This is essential to understanding the academic performance of college students. For anyone working twenty plus hours a week on top of being a fulltime student is extremely challenging. In society you can't get by or even attend college without working a job. Chloe describes:

So I pay for school myself, which is \$1,400 a month... I don't have time to do my schoolwork because I'm working. But if I don't work, then I won't even have school to begin with. So it's just like this endless cycle. So it's I would much rather not have to work. This isn't something I'm doing for pleasure. It's definitely out of necessity.

Working for most college students is not an option. Chloe has to work 40 hours a week to pay for college. Like Chloe and Ben, some college students' academic performance is severely hindered by their non-academic obligations. If college students did not have to work so many hours, their grades could be almost a letter grade higher. This takes a student from a C average to a B. Participants described feeling frustrated that their grades dropped and emphasized the struggle to perform well academically. While they try to bring up their grades, it is very challenging. Chole specifically mentioned how she experiences feeling jealous toward other students who got scholarships and do not have to work so many hours a week. On top of students working, a lot some are involved in college athletes. Casey explains:

And I'd never like seen grades like that, ever on like any of my report cards. So at that point I was like completely overwhelmed and I just couldn't function. Yeah. I like didn't want to do anything. I was constantly burnt out and then I just couldn't get like, my work done.

Casey is a Division One college athlete at Old Dominion University. She practices twenty hours a week in addition to other athletic requirements. When asked about how her identity as a student was impacted, she mentioned the time she took Anatomy and Statistics at the same time. Those two high-demand classes she had to take for her major and being a college athlete significantly impacted her grades in the classes, as she struggled to balance all three. Casey also experienced feeling burnt out, which is something the majority of participants felt.

This theme is significantly important to understanding the essence of college students balancing their obligations and its impact on their academic performance. Participants experienced feeling burnt out, jealous, and frustrated. They express how difficult it is to balance academics and non-academic obligations. While declining GPA and grades are important to understanding the essence of college students' experiences, it is also essential to understand what factors contribute to this decrease in academic performance.

Compromising Future Opportunities

Numerous factors can contribute to lower grades and affect one's GPA. In this section, we examine the effect of limited to no access to office hours, teacher meetings, and study time. Additionally, we will look at how one's obligations impact ways to improve one's grade and career opportunities. This section will allow one to gather a different perspective in order to understand the essence of how college students' obligations impact their academics. Chloe states:

I can't get involved with the activities on campus. Like, I'll see all the time on, like, the newsletter. "Oh, you should do this. You should do this." I missed out on a lot of networking opportunities, which is, like, half of what college is just because I have to work at a fast food place to pay for, like, the education here.

Chloe works 40 hours a week to pay off school, and on top of class and homework, she shares her frustration as she wishes she could do all the opportunities college provides. However, her work hinders these opportunities. Not being able to attend networking opportunities is detrimental. This is extremely important for college students as they are studying for their future careers, and with the job market, connections are essential. Megan describes:

I would want to add like I had wanted to add like a business minor or something, but it just like I wouldn't have the time to take the extra credit, so I think definitely if I wasn't rowing, I would want to like explore like more things that aren't related to my degree academically just to be more like well-rounded.

When asked if Megan would add more to her degree if she had fewer non-academic obligations, she stated she would. When asked this question, all of the participants agreed and listed what they would add. This is a huge finding, as so many college students would expand their degrees if they didn't have to work to pay for college. This starts to question how much more successful and educated students would be if paying for college didn't impact their experiences. Megan explains:

I definitely think I would like form study groups and stuff because I feel like that would help a lot but right now I just don't have time in my schedule that like would work for

everyone else and then I think using like the tutoring centers and just like having more of a relationship with my professors and going to their office hours too.

Megan's non-academic obligations pull her away from being able to be where she wants academically; these are missed opportunities to improve her grade. These things can take you from a B student to an A student. That extra time studying and really trying to comprehend the material you were just taught is crucial. Unfortunately, most college students struggle to achieve this because they are so busy with all their obligations. On top of this, a lot of college athletes like Megan miss classes due to competitions. This pulls students away from learning and also does not provide them with the proper time to catch back up.

This theme explains why college students' grades are dropping and allows one to better understand the essence of balancing academic and non-academic performance. College students experience many missed opportunities. Universities and teachers are providing resources to help students; however, these resources are out of touch as students are too busy paying for college to receive them. Not only does balancing a lot of obligations affect students' grades, but it also affects their health.

Having Obligations Decreases Mental and Physical Health

Away from grades and accomplishments, college students are human beings, and their health is impacted. One's health has a direct impact on their performance. This experience is extremely important to understand the essence of balancing academic and nonacademic obligations. We will examine the effects one's obligations have through the lack of focus, negativity, burnout, and limited sleep making college students sick. Casey states:

On the days when I'm like really tired if I'm not having any caffeine it makes it a lot harder for me to focus and stay focused in class. I tend to zone out more because I'm just like so tired that it's like I'm trying to focus on like staying awake and like paying attention that like I get caught up with not paying attention.

When asked how Casey experienced studying and paying attention in class while balancing her obligations, she explained that when she gets less sleep, she can't focus as well in class. This is negatively affecting her mental health and her mental capability as long as her physical health as being extremely tired is not good for your body. Megan describes:

I would say it's kind of negative just because I usually like do not want to get out of bed and then it kind of doesn't set like a great tone for the rest of your day, but we try and like bring the energy to practice and then deal with whatever the rest of the day but my Tuesdays are like really long days so it's kind of tiring.

Megan has to get up for practice at 4:30 a.m. on Tuesdays. When asked if this early wake-up impacts her day, she describes her experience on Tuesdays as negative. Depending on her obligations and what time she can go to bed, she does not get a lot of sleep. This lack of sleep and longing to go back and nap negatively affects her day mentally, as she struggles to be proactive and energetic. Chloe explains:

Back in the past, when I only slept four hours a night, I did all my work. But I'm, like, at the point now where I'm like, I value sleep so much. Like, I can't do that anymore. And I don't want my eye twitch to come back. So I was like, really that was really trippy. It looked like there was, like, a worm under my eye. It was gross.

Chloe explained her experience of trying to excel in all of her obligations. She ended up getting sick and realized that she couldn't excel in all of her obligations in a healthy way. She has to sacrifice getting homework done on time or not turning in quality work so she can get sleep. So many college students experience states of exhaustion from little sleep. This lifestyle is unhealthy for college students, but they face so many obligations and do not have enough time to sleep.

This theme is one of the last parts of understanding the essence of college students' academic performance. We analyzed how the students' obligations made them sick and extremely sleep deprived, which can have an indirect impact on their academic performance. While we have been analyzing the negative impacts, it is also important to understand that some college students might not experience the same things and that there are benefits to having so many obligations.

Taking Steps to Create Balance

This theme is the last piece of understanding the essence of college students' academic performance. It is important to discover what steps college students are taking to manage all their obligations. We will analyze this through the positive effects, mental changes, lifestyle changes, and some unethical practices. Megan states:

I would say my sense of self as a student has definitely improved being a student athlete just because we're being held accountable for our grades and everything and I want to do well for the team. I would say it's definitely improved. It can be hard to like manage both and do well in both but I would say it's definitely helped.

When asked about how being a student athlete impacted her identity as a student, Megan explained positive experiences. As a student athlete, in order to compete, one must achieve a certain GPA, and all student athletes are assigned study hall hours. These hours vary based on one's GPA; the lower the GPA one has, the more study hall hours they must complete every week. This is a benefit and support system student athletes receive. Casey describes:

They give me experiences so it's like with a lot of my classes, I write a lot of papers that like deal with like what's one experience that like you can relate this to...in the moment, it might be like, "Oh, I don't know what I'm gonna use this but then like later on," it's like, "Oh, I've done this before, now I can help other people." Yeah, like I can teach other people this.

When asked how Casey's non-academic obligations impact her academic performance, she describes how they provide her with many new experiences that help her in life. These experiences are extremely important for college students as it prepares them for their future and diversifies their knowledge. This is something someone with little to no obligations will not achieve.

When asked about how her non-academic obligations affect her academics Cchloe explains that she tends to balance these obligations by relying on cheating when she doesn't have the brain power and needs to sleep. Chloe explains:

I do find myself relying on, like, ChatGPT a lot if we're gonna be so honest. And I wish it wasn't it didn't have to be like that because I genuinely love writing. I love speaking Spanish, but it's like, at the end of the day, we have to meet a quota for school, and I have to meet a quota for work to pay for that school.

This is one of the unethical ways college students use to balance these obligations. This tends to be consistent with the reason why people use AI to get homework done. As AI usage is a rising issue this insight provides people with a better understanding as to why. Many college students have to find ways to balance all their obligations. If they do not their performance will be hindered. These steps they take to create the balance allows them to handle everything more efficiently.

Throughout the four themes the essence of college students' experiences with academic performance have been analyzed. Ones obligations can leave a positive effect but also many negative effects. Different perspectives of each college students lives were showcased and while they all have different obligations they tend to experience the same things. If given the opportunity and more free time all participants would add more to their degree and engage in ways to better their academic performance. On the other hand these obligations the students work provides them with lots of life experiences essential for their future. There was a lot of frustration shared throughout this theme but it all came from extremely hardworking students.

Identity Formations

In terms of identity and the impact it has on students participating in this study, our participants described a clear correlation between the balance of in and out of school obligations with the way students' identities are altered. Whether the impacts are in a positive light or take on a negative effect on the participants has been noted and documented. In the following section we will illustrate, through multiple themes that were prevalent in this study, just how our participants' identities were impacted through the balancing of academic and non-academic obligations.

Seeing Identities as Strengths

One of the predominant trends we noticed while conducting interviews with our selected participants was the view many had regarding their non-academic identity as a strength in contrast to a more negative outlook. Among these views of identities as strengths came the notion some participants mentioned as strengthening their student identity and their own willingness and drive to work harder in their studies while maintaining proper performance in the arenas they were involved in being *in* school as well as out of school. Amidst our pool of participating students, a prime example of the reinforcing interplay between academics and non-academic responsibilities is when Megan was asked about how her sense of student identity impacted her identity as an athlete. He was quoted as describing it like this:

I would say my sense of self as a student has definitely improved being a student athlete just because we're being held accountable for our grades and everything and I want to do well for the team. I would say it's definitely improved. It can be hard to like manage both and do well in both But I would say it's definitely helped.

Along with the intersectionality of experiencing a multitude of academic or otherwise non-academic identities comes the illustrated impact of a heightened awareness and performance based on personal drive and desire for productivity. What stuck out to us from our participants' testimonies was the overarching vision of viewing the multiple identity scenario they were experiencing as a means to work harder to accomplish their goals as briefly described by Eric:

You know, I take a lot of pride in my work. I like to bust ass, you know, it helps me sleep better at night. I don't really like to drag my feet. Those are the qualities I like to take out of the things I do.

Instead of letting the experience of splitting attention between work and school hinder his performance, Eric had seemingly used it as a driving factor from a preexisting work ethic that was fueled by the work-load expected of him.

This theme has been a vital discovery for our study as it helps to outline some of the positively reinforcing aspects of the balancing academic and non-academic obligations for a student's identity and overall work ethic. In comparison to what some may believe in terms of how this phenomenon affects a student's identity, the described experiences help shed light into the fact that there may be constructive aspects of non-academic focuses while enrolled in academic programs.

Recognizing Existence of Primary and Secondary Identities

Our participants' experiences with identifying with multiple social and performative roles comes with a described realization that there is a variance between a primary and secondary identity (or identities) that carry differing amounts of weight in their everyday lives. Some of our participants described feeling as if their student identity was the driving sense of what they felt most involved in, citing how school was the main reason they were either working or involved in a sport in order to support the pursuit of a higher education within the confines of their means. One direct mention by our participant Casey stating: "Because at the end of the day I'm here for school and the athlete part just kind of came with it."

Is a direct accreditation to the primary student identity being experienced by her.

Along with the primary identities experienced by our participants, many were quoted as to mention non-academic involvements, such as volunteering, various roles within social circles,

artistic identities, and religious commitments. Not initially part of our research question, experiencing outlying identities and roles while balancing self-described “primary” obligations is a factor that may be attributed to a common factor leading to the involvement in non-academic identity obligations. Highlighting a wide range of secondary identities, Chloe mentions:

I really like to be, like, the home person in the friend group. Mhmm. I love, like, interior decorating. So I got an apartment where the landlord doesn't care that I paint, so I've painted, like, all the rooms. I really enjoy that. I enjoy having my friends over. I like meal prepping, so I'll do, like, these big elaborate meals, like Thanksgiving dinner, like, every week. Oh. And then everyone comes over. We watch Survivor, and it's a lot of fun. I love going out. So I love being like that home person where someone could call at, like, 1AM, and I'd be like, “What's up? Where can I get you?” So that's a big part of my identity.

Along with her primary identities and involvements with schoolwork and being in the workforce, Chloe, among our other participants, have shown an insistent effort to be involved in the things that they enjoy as well as the necessary responsibilities that are expected of them.

Experiencing Shifts in Identity

Contrary to the positive connotation in the previous thematic sections, an overwhelming majority of our participants also often experienced dramatic shifts in their own personal identity experiences based on a multitude of factors such as situation (social or professional), a substantial pull of one identity over the other(s), or habitual changes due to identity related factors. These shifts in identity in various circumstances, as illustrated by our participants, helped

to better understand the ever changing nature of the experience felt internally while balancing academic and non-academic obligations. One of our participants, Frank, directly mentions his shift in identity within his sport of baseball and a situation where he was hurt which impeded his ability to participate in his sport:

You know I gave like, everything to the sport of baseball, so, I think for me being hurt and being away from the sport, it kind of changed my identity. It kind of shifted, I would say, it shifted me to a new identity and kind of like, try to find myself.

Along with shifts in identity due to unforeseen circumstances such as injury, or due to changes in dynamics within involvements, a staggering display of a waning of *student* identity was prevalent in our participants' testimonies. Coupled with the often overbearing time constraints and deadlines in either work/athletics or school, many of our participants expressed a lack of essential functions such as sleep or opportunities to spend time with friends and loved ones. The combination of these aspects of balancing obligations and responsibilities create, for many of our participants, a decline of identifying as a student that bleeds into their everyday life with a lessening push to complete assignments or go to class on time or at all and instead prioritize non-academic responsibilities.

Experiencing Identities as Liabilities

In addition to the previously mentioned thematic sections that were discussed by participants, a large percentage of our participants expressed their personal feelings of discontent with the ever demanding sprawl of obligations they are responsible for. Not only dealing with

non-academic obligations per se, but experiences tying to personal struggles and events have had an express effect on the personal and professional lives of some of our participants in the study.

Chloe directly mentioned:

It's very difficult. I have a lot of jealousy, towards the, you know, freshmen that come in, and they kind of especially the ones that are on scholarships because what happened is I graduated high school during COVID, and I got a really good scholarship for ODU that would have meant I didn't have to work like that anymore. But I just had a lot of, like you know, I had a couple of grandparents die. It was really difficult. So I had to, drop out the first semester. And then when I came back a couple semesters later, I, like, was like, can I please have like, I had a 4.0 [GPA] in high school? Can I please have it? You know, COVID. They're like, no.

She had experienced a difficult time with gaining the support she needed with coping and managing the various events happening in her life. Coupled with the lack of support and overall air of dissatisfaction these participants experience, the feelings of jealousy and distaste for students that do *not* have the need to work or be involved in other activities/organizations can be crippling and damaging to the students' identity.

Along with experiencing a discontent with personally identifying with social or professional roles, participants were also noted as feeling a sense of debt due to identity toward someone they hold in high regard such as a coach or parent that has put trust in or enabled the participant to take part in their respective role. This feeling of debt has been expressed by participants as being a driving force for excelling in their studies or athletics yet also as an added stressor for maintaining said identity.

Mental Health

When discussing how students cope with balancing their academic and non academic obligations, students provided many similarities with coping strategies, while also displaying some variance depending on the severity of the event they are coping with, as well as minor variance in the coping strategies themselves. For the sample of students we analyzed, they revealed five main themes that was representative of the coping strategies they used, those being: (a) staying resilient and navigating challenges, (b) managing time and responsibilities, (c) growing through reflection and experience, (d) seeking social and emotional support, and (e) stepping back and finding comfort. Below, a discussion on these corresponding themes will be elaborated on.

Staying Resilient and Navigating Challenges

The concept of staying resilient and navigating challenges is meant to represent the encouragement students look towards when faced with pressures either academically or non academically. It also gives attention to difficulties that test student's motivation, where they reflect on the experiences and methods that helped them maintain resilience. It connects with the question of how students cope with balancing academic and non academic obligations by showing how student workers and student athletes alike stay motivated in the face of discouragement.

A shared feature when it came to students staying resilient and navigating their challenges was coming to terms with the position they're in. A working student by the name of Eric describes his perception of accepting the standard he set for himself as a student. He said the following:

And then after a while I realized, you know, what does the GPA even mean? I doubt that it'll affect my ability to get a job in the future. If it's just, If I don't have a ... I think it's just bragging rights.

This moment of realization allows Eric to be comfortable with his role as student, and while his GPA may not be at its highest, he continues his role as a student. Taking into consideration Eric's non academic obligations as a mechanic and a cook, his already packed schedule would make it difficult to become an overachieving student, representing the willingness of students sacrificing their academics if the situation calls for it.

Finding encouragement comes in many forms according to students, and this discussion will look at it from a more uplifting manner. Taking it from the perspective of a student athlete, Megan describes her experience while being part of the team. She says the following:

Okay, I would say like when we just did like a 2K, so like a, on the indoor rowing machines like an individual piece and that's kind of like our main like race distance. So that went really well, so I would say like when I do well in practice that definitely makes me feel better about being a student athlete and like all the work that you're doing like amounts to something, so that definitely helps.

This reflects the importance of students feeling prideful of their efforts, showing there are motives in students' lives that contribute to keeping their spirits high. It is a coping mechanism where, although Megan is working hard, she still feels good about it all.

Sometimes finding comfort in one's own efforts isn't enough to serve as a coping mechanism, and a majority of student's demonstrated this by mentioning the importance of

keeping their mind distracted from their obligations. A student by the name of Chloe touches on her experience with this by saying the following:

Other things I feel is I get a lot of, like, manic episodes, I would say, especially when I'm not constantly taking my ADHD meds, which I don't because I'm lazy, and I don't want to take my ADHD meds. And so I'll, like, go through periods where I'm, like like, painting the whole house. And I should be doing schoolwork. And and because I'm like, you know, I don't like the shade of blue. You know? Paints only 15 [dollars] a can. Let me get that. So I have, like, these manic episodes, but I, it's not, like, full manic. It's not like, like, BPD. It's just more like, woo. I wanna do something that's not school related.

Chloe speaks more on the navigation of challenges, where while she admits she could be using that time for school, she acknowledges that a break from school is necessary sometimes. Each student has their own individualized version of said distraction, but the theme still remains where students aim to set aside time for themselves through an activity they find fitting. Again, this represents a coping mechanism, in this case one that allows students to take a break from academics.

Having to find the means to cope within a student athlete or working student lifestyle often required students to stay resilient as they navigated their challenges. Students describe how holding certain viewpoints keeps them optimistic. Aside from said viewpoints, having a distracted mind is also shown to be a strategy used by students. Both are a solid representation of the challenges experienced by participants, serving as a foundation for the upcoming themes.

Managing Time and Responsibilities

With resilience establishing a method for navigating through challenges, time management becomes a response to said challenges. Participants organize their schedules to better fit their needs, doing so in such a way that permits them to gain control over their responsibilities. Time management is a valuable theme even under the eyes of our literature review, which mentions how 22% of students will adapt their schedule and miss class so they can attend their job (Curtis & Shania, 2002). On the topic of schedules, a participant by the name of Frank speaks of his experience being a student athlete and a worker, saying the following:

Oh, yeah, always, always. Just, I think that's like the biggest thing like coming into school, is just time management, understanding what needs to be done. I mean, once you understand, you kind of can...can build a whole schedule around everything.

Frank captured a vital aspect of the student athlete and working student lifestyle. This is a theme that was presented across many participants, where Frank explained its importance in a way that makes coping with one's obligations much more doable.

Sometimes schedules need to be tweaked in order to produce a schedule that is optimal for students. Seeing how students adapt gives us as researchers a lot of information in terms of how they view their role as students with obligations. A working student by the name of Bren indicated his decision making when it came to determining his schedule, and he says the following:

You know, I used to go for early morning classes. But now I'm going for midday classes, because you know, I just feel like as each semester comes and goes, you try to find ways to help you be able to fully understand the work that you are going to be facing from each classes, you know. So you always just trying to find means to make college easier.

Intentionally arranging one's schedule aids in reducing the toll that academics takes on students, where Bren as with other participants find value in a schedule that works for them. Learning from past experience also allowed Bren to form his schedule as necessary, and as will be seen with the theme discussed after this one, learning from experience has its provided benefits according to students.

The last excerpt provides important insight on student's perspectives when in the classroom. A student athlete by the name of Megan talks about how there are times where she has trouble with engagement in class. Student's management of time and responsibilities are a direct reflection of engagement, therefore holding major importance in the discussion of its theme. Megan says: "Sometimes I have problems staying focused in class, but I try to remind myself, this is the best time. I don't wanna have to spend more time reviewing it later. So that's definitely how I try and stay focused." Staying engaged in class provides for a less occupied schedule in the future, setting students up to be less overwhelmed come later.

Students displayed the importance of time management, and if done right, things could be made easier on their end. Students also spoke of their thoughts behind determining how to manage their responsibilities. This thought behind the decisions made by students will be further investigated in the next theme, where students speak on their perspectives of growing through reflection and experience.

Growing Through Reflection and Experience

While students spoke on determining how to manage their time and responsibilities, determining how to cope with academic and non academic obligations sometimes lies within oneself, not on the responsibility or schedule itself. Students demonstrate that reflecting on past and current

experience helps them better manage their life as working students and student athletes. Whether it's making their responsibilities easier or becoming more comfortable with oneself, reflection and experience have shown to help students effectively pursue their responsibilities.

A discussion on how experience with non academic obligations benefits academic obligations is necessary, as it demonstrates how both can work in conjunction with one another. Specifically, it shows the advantages that come with experience, as will be discussed by Casey, a nursing major and student athlete who also does hospice volunteer work. She says the following:

I would say that my non-academic obligations impact my academic performance because like they give me experiences so it's like with a lot of my classes, I write a lot of papers that like deal with like okay like, "What's one experience that like you can relate this to?" Or like, "What can you do to like or what have you done that like can impact this?" Yeah and so I think like with all the volunteering that I've done like since like middle school that like being around like hospitals and like everything else like it gives me experiences that like really impact like what I'm like learning now. Yeah 'cause it is like okay like I've been around that, like, I know what that is.

This is an idea shared across other participants, where exposure to extra curricular activities has made them better suited to manage academics such as improved skills in the classroom.

Experience can be in the form of self growth as well. This is where reflection comes into play, where a different participant speaks of how they reflect on what changes they need to make in life. Bren reflects by saying the following:

I know it's pretty simple. It's like it was just looking at what is slowing me down and what isn't. So what I'll have to do? So I had to cut one off, to be able good- to be able to be able to be good at the other one.

Bren recognizes that there are adjustments he needs to make in accordance with the priorities that hold most importance. Many participants including Bren go through this phase of recognition towards how decision making should be done.

Reflections come in more than just thoughts. With this next participant, he finds himself writing down his reflections. Bren also states the following:

I would say definitely, since, like I started journaling, I would definitely say, like, like I said, like that voice in my head. I feel like now that I journal it's hard for me to like, I don't really think much, because I'm already writing down everything I'm thinking about. Either in the morning or at night. And I kinda, you can now, you can actually tell the difference because you do less thinking. And it's more just doing it, you know what I mean. When you think about something, the less you want to do it.

As seen with other participants, becoming familiar through reflection and experience with one's encounters makes students more comfortable with taking on tasks. Scenarios like these show how students can more effectively handle situations that arise, leading them towards growth.

Growth is a huge aspect of this theme, where students become better suited for the future through their experiences and reflections. Students gain improved management of their responsibilities by experiencing this reflection and growth. Sometimes growth is gained through

resources outside oneself, which in this case, is help from others. The next excerpt will talk about how students can further cope by seeking social and emotional support.

Seeking Social and Emotional Support

Students may not be able to do it all on their own, and while self reflection and experience guides students to better handle their responsibilities, some additional assistance is still necessary. With this theme, we try to convey the many social and emotional support systems available to participants, and how they impact them as either student athletes or working students. Attention is also brought to the opposite side, where some participants spoke about the limitations that blocked them from using said support systems.

As was mentioned, social support systems are not always present. An excerpt by Casey describes the disconnect she has from her social life as a result of her academic and non academic obligations. She says:

At the end of the day I'm so tired so it's like all I want to do is just like lay in bed yeah and like just lay on my phone so it's like I'm not really around people as much as like I want to be. Yeah so it's like because I'm just so tired yeah but it's like I want to talk to my friends like I want to hang out with my friends but because I'm so tired it's like I just don't want to talk to anyone.

Casey describes how she'd desire to have that time with her friends, but given the circumstances she cannot. Themes that have already been discussed such as saying resilient, managing time, and self reflection, sometimes don't do enough for student's, as was seen with Casey's case.

Sometimes students decide to make an adjustment that allows for their academic and non academic obligations to take up less of their time, where in the next example, they can more easily tend to their academics. For Bren's case, he says the following:

So I'll say, I started limiting the amount of days I was working, gradually because it was having a negative impact on me, you know, taking that time to study, or to, or to, you know, like, make that extra call to a professor and say, "Hey, I don't get this part. Can you explain this to me a little more?" So those times were taken away. So yeah, it was, it was really based on that, on that whole situation that I started to cut my working days off

Bren's discussion mentions how this extra time could allow him time to communicate with professors, filling in that social aspect in terms of coping and better managing academic responsibilities. It also ties back to shifting one's schedule around as necessary, while also touching on the self reflection theme, where Bren recognized that his number of working days was having a negative impact on him.

A huge pattern across participants is their appreciation of having social outlets in their lives. It is considered a strong contributor to helping students cope with the experience of balancing academic and non academic obligations. In the case of Chloe, she says the following:

I'm an extrovert. So, like, I need [social interactions]. I have about three to four friends that I, like, see on a weekly basis. I see my boyfriend on a weekly basis because, like, I'll go crazy. Like, I need to watch TV, and I need to, like, hang out.

It's agreed upon across the students we interviewed that socialness is important, and Chloe's view of it was nothing short of this. It also taps into the lifestyle of a student, where it's not only a coping mechanism, but a part of life that many students view as necessary.

As the discussion of the themes gets deeper, the presence of previous themes have found themselves in this discussion of seeking social and emotional support. Through the input of participants, seeking support through the social aspects of students' lives has shown to contribute to a more comfortable student life.

Stepping Back and Finding Comfort

Although social and emotional support resembles its own portion in the coping mechanisms used by students, sometimes students have to take a detour or more drastic measures to fulfill their comfort. It is a coping mechanism of its own and could be described as a shortcut for achieving any of the other previously mentioned themes.

For this instance, the participant takes a step back from college, and finds themselves no longer involved in the student life. Bren speaks of his initial years of working while at college, and says the following:

I even took off almost like 2 years, just not to come to college because it was stressing me out with with bills and all the stuff that you have to do. I didn't want to pull that stress on my parents, so that was putting stress on me.

This theme ties back with other themes of responsibility management, where the priority in Bren's life switched up. The added stress he had from staying in school was relieved by dropping out, where it demonstrates how some students encounter scenarios that require them to step back.

Finding comfort doesn't always call for drastic measures, however, the idea still persists that students will adjust their situation to best fit their comfort. With the input of Chloe, she goes on to display this by saying the following:

The marketing internship was a little stressful for a minute, but I'm kinda, like, settled in now. It's because I have to post reels, and I don't wanna post a reel. Like, I don't wanna be in it, so I've not posted a reel yet. Okay. I was supposed to have already been in, like, sixteen, but whatever. I, you know what? I'll do everything else. I made the newspaper. But yeah. So for a while, they were stressing me out, but then I was like, "You know what? I'm not gonna do the reels. Sorry. You know, over my dead body." So now it's like when I'm at school, I totally focus on school, but I do have ADHD.

Chloe along with other participants strive to find an approach that makes them feel most comfortable with taking on academic and non-academic obligations. In Chloe's case, she is better able to handle her academic needs by achieving this comfort, coping in a way that allows her to continue without stress.

Finding comfort can also come through quick and easy solutions. As we have seen already, students aim to work in a manner where they feel comfortable, but sometimes comfort can come through a boost in one's productivity. Casey describes her method of doing so by saying the following:

I'd say I'd say yeah, like if I don't get enough sleep the night before then I'm like super groggy at practice the next morning and then I can't like function. So like Tuesdays and Thursdays I definitely need to get caffeine because you can't function at all. Depends.

Like some days like I'll get like a big Red Bull or like a Celsius and other days I try like to not drink any. Yeah, but it just really depends

Taking on responsibilities requires students to change their approach from time to time. In the case of Chloe, she creates her own approach for certain days out of the week. It is her form of coping when the days get rough.

Sometimes students find themselves in a pinch, and need to adjust accordingly. These difficult positions range from intensity, but the point still stands where students achieve improved well-being through the use of said coping mechanisms.

The themes presented hold their own areas in resembling coping mechanisms, but when looked at fully, come together in tandem. Having to find the means to cope with the mental health challenges encountered in a student athlete or working student lifestyle often requires students to stay resilient and navigate their challenges, along with properly managing their time and responsibilities. The management of balancing their obligations is also associated with students' growth through reflection and experience and seeking social and emotional support. If need be, students also find themselves stepping back and finding comfort.

Emergent Insights

Throughout the entire interview process we have conducted, some outlying insights have been discovered, which were expressed by our participants, that did not directly fall under the points illustrated above. Such insights posed a level of importance because they helped show individual experience versus the overarching questions we were attempting to gain knowledge upon specifically. One key factor that was made apparent was some of the coping mechanisms

utilized to alleviate, even if only temporarily, the stress of experiencing multiple obligatory responsibilities. Our participant Chloe discussed strategy she tried out, which was choosing to not sleep:

It got to the point where it was, like, at first, it felt like the superhuman ability. Like, oh, I could just stay for three days and, like, get all my work done. But, eventually, I was like, I'm not thinking. And then now I can't even do it. Like, if I'm, like, three hours in, like, the words are floating on the screen, like, I think I really scrambled my brain up that year. Okay. So I don't do it anyway. It's probably good.

Another coping method used to combat the stresses of experiencing these academic and non-academic obligations that were mentioned to us during an interview was the use of cigarettes and nicotine as a temporary escape from stress as mentioned by Eric:

You know, at the end of the day, you know, go hang out with friends and, you know, somebody pass me a cigarette. Don't mind if I do. You know, it feels good, but in the moment, but you know, after, you know, after a buzz, you feel a little stupid. So that's why it really didn't last long.

Although emphasized as *not* a coping mechanism, he did proceed to mention that it was a way to relieve stress he felt during the day, although knowing it was only temporary.

Discussion

Our findings have described the essence of how college students balance academics and 20 hours of non-academic obligations. While the participants were all involved in different activities and work they experienced some of the same things. When faced with an extreme amount of obligations like working a lot or being in season competing, the participants felt either overworked and exhausted. The participants tend to lack getting good sleep and in order to continue with their busy lifestyles the participants made lifestyle changes or mental shifts to better their time management skills. They also described how they had to decrease their social life. The participants all stated if they had less obligations they would pursue adding more things to their degree or they would receive better grades. The findings conclude that consistently college students are balancing so much to where they can not reach their full potential academically. College students feel frustrated and tired but they are resilient and try to figure out ways to manage everything.

Our study provides a solid grasp on the balancing of external obligations with school, not just analyzing the interaction between external obligations and academic performance, but doing so in a way that includes student's perspectives on how they internalize this experience. While existing research looks at quantitative measures and its influence on academic performance, our research ties it all together, focusing on the intersection of identity, mental health, and work-life balance. By highlighting participants' identities, especially their identities as students, employees, or athletes, we are met with answers that explain the shaping behind student's coping strategies and GPA. Our study also acknowledges both student-athlete obligations and

working-student obligations under one analysis, rather than their own individual study as is seen with previous research.

In comparison with previous research on student athletes, our findings have shown mixed results. All of the athletes we interviewed reported that athletics did not have a significant impact on their GPA, with Frank student describing it as “It's not hard if you're doing the right things” This aligns with the conclusion reached by Knott (2016), where they stated athlete identity and GPA had no correlation. However, what wasn't addressed by previous literature is how a majority of the student athletes we interviewed believed that academic's would be less stressful if it weren't for their obligations. While they're not a direct influence on GPA, the process and experience of managing both is still influenced. There is another important consideration when it comes to role identity, where we found that student athletes coupling their athletic responsibilities with academics felt natural to them because of their strong sense of themselves as an athlete. It could be said that although it doesn't necessarily make it easier for them, it certainly makes it more manageable because of its prominence in their lives, or the role's salience. Role salience is described by Knott (2016) when they say “Prominence is identified as the key factor influencing role salience. Time is one element that demonstrates prominence of a role. The amount of time dedicated to a specific role strengthens that role” (p. 12). Frank, a baseball player we interviewed, when asked about baseball's impact on his academic performance stated: “Honestly, I would say it has zero effect. I mean, I've been a, like I said, I've been playing baseball since... I was 4 years old.” Given Frank's constant involvement in sports, it can be said that his identity as an athlete is fairly developed.

Taking on a similar perspective to ours in terms of working students, Curtis & Shania (2002) found that 46% of students felt they would have better grades if they didn't have work obligations. This aligns with our findings, where all our participants that were working students agreed they would have performed better in school if it weren't for having to fulfill work requirements. All students recognized that they had the potential to achieve a higher academic standing, even considering other majors, minors, and certificates, but given their position as working students it remained out of the picture for them.

A majority of our research team comprises of students working an average of 20 or more hours per week. This has helped selecting and researching the topic discussed and served as a driving factor for conducting sound research. The understanding of the phenomenon has helped us connect with the participants and ask more relevant follow up questions. This led to a more thorough answer from participants in the study. Being students who have successfully completed sociology focused classes, our understanding of major sociological theories provides us with strongly relevant experience, assisting our discussion and analysis on identity theory and how student's roles shaped their experience. Because of our various fields of interest and study, the data analysis provided us a unique and thought-out system of analysis as it is reviewed through different lenses of our team.

There were some limitations present when conducting our study. Considering our position as first-time researchers and interviewers, the interview process might've been influenced through missed follow-up questions, or the lost opportunity of achieving a better conversation flow during the exchange in the interview. Additionally, regarding the interview, there was not a chance to perform any additional follow-up interviews with participants. The

option of adjusting our interview questions through an ongoing or iterative style was not made possible either, eliminating this opportunity for refining our questions. Another consideration is sample size, where a larger sample size could have altered the results. Lastly, because of our roles as students, and some of us working students, this could have introduced the possibility of bias in regards to our perspective on academic and work centered questions.

Future research could build on our work by looking at the data over a longer period of time. Particularly, aspects like student identity and methods for coping can be developed into a more expansive study that identifies their correlation to GPA throughout multiple semesters. This extended period of time will allow for a more definitive relationship to be built between each aspect. Another route that can be taken by future researchers is looking at a set number of students who use school or athletic resources, while also looking at a control group that's absent of these resources. With this, a more clear determination can be made on these resources' effectiveness. New questions inspired from our research might include: "How do campus-based support influence student performance and identity?" Another question that could be asked is on coping strategies, posing the question of "How do coping strategies shift and develop throughout the school year?"

Despite our study's limitations and the need for future research, our participants shared valuable insight on the inner intricacies of how a student is internally affected by the split in attention toward academic and non-academic obligations. These insights can be used by students to gain a better understanding of ways to either navigate the fragile terrain of multiple focuses while in school and to know that they are not alone in the struggle, as well as educators for gaining a better understanding what students may be facing in terms of studies and performance

as well as internal struggles and ways to better support these students. As Curtis & Shania (2002) states, about 55% of college students are employed, thus falling into or near the scope of our research conducted and the findings can be garnered to create a better idea of how to navigate the work/school balance. A valid policy or structural shift that should be taken into account is a shift from the strict and stagnant nature of many course structures, to a more personal system that may take into account an individual student's time constraints and workarounds.

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Appendix

Informed Consent to Participate in Interview	
Introduction to informed consent process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● START RECORDING ● Thank you for your time ● The very first thing I need to do is tell you a bit about the study and make sure I have your consent to move forward with the interview ● I'll basically just be reading off this sheet, but let me know if you'd like me to slow down or if you have any questions
<p>1. I am taking a course called Senior Research Capstone in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Old Dominion University. As part of this course, I am working on a group project where we interview <u>college students</u> about their experiences with balancing academics and at least 20 hours of non-academic obligations</p>	

2. The interview will take about one hour. I will ask you a series of questions related to this topic. I hope for detailed responses and welcome hearing about anything you are comfortable sharing.
3. The interview is completely voluntary. If at any point you want to skip a question, take a break, or end the interview, please let me know. There will not be any negative consequences for skipping a question or ending the interview.
4. I will be recording the interview using voice memos on my phone (or via Zoom) and will create a transcript of our interview. The recordings and transcripts will be available to my other group members, as well as my professor. However, I will do everything possible to protect your privacy. I will not write your real name anywhere on the transcript or in any other study-related materials. At the end of the semester, all recordings and transcripts will be deleted.
5. As part of the project, my group and I will a) write a final paper, and b) present information about our study in the form of a poster at Capstone Research Day. When we do this, we may use quotes from this interview. However, we will not use your real name or any information that could allow someone to identify you.
6. Because this research is for a class project and we will not publish our findings, this project is exempt from Institutional Review Board approval. However, we are still committed to upholding ethical standards related to interview research. As such, if you have any questions or concerns about our project or this interview, please contact our professor, Dr. Amanda Petersen at apeterse@odu.edu or 757-683-3791.
7. Do you have any questions about my project or this interview?
8. As a final step before starting, I just need to receive your verbal consent to begin the interview. Are you comfortable if we begin the interview?

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions

Before we get into the questions about your experience with balancing academics and at least 20 hours of non-academic obligations, I just need to gather some demographic information.

1. What are your 20 hours of non-academic obligations?
2. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
3. What is your gender and preferred pronouns?
4. How old are you?
5. How many in-person classes are you taking at Old Dominion University?
6. How many credit hours are you taking at Old Dominion University?

Interview Questions

<p>Introduction to primary questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for sharing your time and insight • I am here to learn from you, and I would love to hear anything you are comfortable sharing. 	
<p>Topic</p>	<p>Primary Interview Questions</p>	<p>Probing Questions (ask these if the participants does not already address them when responding to the primary question)</p>
<p>Opening</p>	<p>Can you give me an overall sense of what a typical day or week looks like for you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your schedule fluctuate throughout the year? • What is your sleep schedule like?
<p>Identity and obligations</p>	<p>How has your sense of yourself as a student been impacted by your identity as _____?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it positively or negatively affected? • How does your identity as a student fluctuate throughout the year based on your non-academic obligations? • Can you describe an example of when your identity as a student was especially impacted?
<p>Identity and obligations</p>	<p>How has your sense of yourself as a _____ been impacted by your identity as a student?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think it is positively or negatively affected? • How does your identity as a _____ fluctuate throughout the year? • Can you describe an example of when your identity as a _____ was especially impacted?
<p>Identity and obligations</p>	<p>Okay, so we've talked about your identity as a student and your identity as _____. What other identities or roles are important in your life?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of those identities do you feel is strongest? (Why?) • When other people interact with you, which of these identities do you think they see most strongly? (Why?)
<p>Academic performance and obligations</p>	<p>Could you describe how your non-academic obligations impact your academic performance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has your GPA been impacted? • How do you experience studying and paying attention in class while balancing your obligations?
<p>Academic performance and obligations</p>	<p>What do you think your academic performance would be like if you had fewer obligations?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With that extra time, what would you do to help improve your academic performance? • With that extra time, would you add anything

		to your degree, such as minors or certificates?
<p>My next question has to do with mental health, which I know can be a very sensitive subject. Please know that I do not want you to share anything that feels too personal or traumatic. Also, I am not a mental health professional and won't be able to offer therapeutic support. Given those caveats, would it be okay for you if we discuss the topic of mental health, or would you prefer we skip those questions? (If no, skip. If yes:)</p>		
Coping with academics and obligations	Can you describe your overall mental health while balancing your obligations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think this relates to your identity? • Is there a particular experience that took a toll on your mental health?
Coping with academics and obligations	While balancing all your obligations, what lifestyle changes have you had to make?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What lifestyle change was impacted the most? • How did you strategize what changes to make?
Coping with academics and obligations	Beyond lifestyle changes, what other strategies have you used to cope with the pressure of balancing school and your other obligations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any strategies that ended up being harmful to you? • Are there any strategies that ended up being helpful to you?
Closing	Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience balancing academic and non-academic obligations that we haven't discussed yet?	
<p>Free probes (ask these – or questions like these – as follow-up questions to get more in-depth information)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have an example of this? • Could you tell me more about that? • Has this experience been positive or negative? • What does this mean to you? • What would you have done better? • How do you look back at that experience now? • How did you receive the experience? • Was this a shared view? • How did you process it all? • Where was on your mind at the time? • Was there an imbalance you felt? 		

- How did this impact you?
- Did you expect that outcome?

Closing

Closing

- Thank you again
- Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?
- **STOP RECORDING**