

For many teenagers, the time they don't spend in school is a scarce resource. By 2004, the percentage of teenagers using that precious time to work for wages or to look for work had dropped to the lowest on record. This article explores some of the reasons why, including both the tradeoffs and opportunity costs of working or using non-school time in other ways. As you read the article, think about how you choose to use your free time. Are your choices maximizing your utility for today? Or building your human capital for tomorrow?

"Full Activity, Study Schedules Have Many Teens Just Saying No to Jobs"

by Barbara Hagenbaugh, *USA TODAY*, April 7, 2005

Many teens today are working harder than ever—just not for a paycheck. Teens are studying more, are taking heavier course loads and are involved in more extracurricular activities than ever before. But the percentage of teenagers working or looking for work has steadily fallen in the past two decades . . .

What is in question is whether teens are missing out on important lessons learned from early work experience. Jeylan Mortimer, a sociology professor . . . at the University of Minnesota, . . . has found that working moderate amounts during high school was beneficial not just while the students were in school but beyond.

Teens who worked learned key basics, what she calls "generic learning," such as showing up on time and dealing with supervisors. They also developed stronger self-esteem and other traits that carried beyond their teen years . . . "They learned how to deal with people, they developed interpersonal skills, they learned how to overcome shyness."

But while some economists, sociologists and psychologists say it is important to learn those lessons at an early age, others argue that the type of work teens do generally doesn't help that much later in life . . . If students are focusing their attention on school and other worthwhile activities, their lack of work experience might not be harmful in the long run.

"This could be a good thing," says Erica Groshen, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York . . . "for employers and for society as a whole if it means we are getting more and better education for our workers."

Not Enough Time

Brian Cavanagh-Strong, 18, of Ann Arbor, Mich., has worked a total of three weeks in his life, but he's hardly sitting around watching reruns of *Friends*.

The high school senior gets all A's and takes a heavy course load, including advanced journalism, advanced Latin poetry, a one-on-one advanced calculus course, and writing. After school, he participates in theater, currently rehearsing two hours a day . . . practices jazz piano at least 1 1/2 hours a day in addition to playing in a band, then studies for a few hours. All of those activities leave little time for work, he says . . .

Cavanagh-Strong's parents give him a monthly allowance for expenses. In return, he works around the house . . .

The decline in teens working is not a result of rich kids getting handouts from mom and dad . . . From 1990 to 2002 [the drop] was much more pronounced among kids from families whose income ranks in the bottom quarter than those from the highest. Middle-income kids had the greatest likelihood of working . . .

Pressure to achieve—at school, in sports and in other activities—is one of the key theories for why fewer teens have jobs:

School . . . There is evidence that kids are working harder in school. In 2004, the number of Advanced Placement tests taken by high school students was up 65% from five years earlier . . . The more hours students spent on homework, the less likely they were to have jobs . . .

College pressure . . . Many students think colleges see holding offices in extracurricular groups, such as Spanish Club and band, as more valuable than working six hours a week as a cashier . . .

But Andrew Flagel, dean of admissions at George Mason University outside Washington, D.C., says working can be an important asset on applications.

"It doesn't sound to anyone like working at the local diner is sexy enough," he says. "But I've read wonderful essays from students who talk about the difference they made in doing their jobs."

College is costly . . . With costs mounting, the expectation that students can save for college working part time while in high school and make a dent in their expenses has eroded significantly. To some students, it makes more sense to spend the time studying for the SATs rather than working . . .

While some research has shown that working while in school helps students manage their time better, leading them to earn better grades and make more money when they graduate, other studies have shown teen work has no effect and might hurt students when they try to go to school at the same time.

"I personally don't think it does them much good . . .," says Jeffrey Arnett, a psychology professor at the University of Maryland . . . "The work itself is usually mindless drudgery." . . .

But Atlanta honors student Stephanie Binkow, 16, thinks her time working Saturdays at Dolce, a gourmet food, candy and chocolate shop, is well worth it. That's not because the money helps pay for trips to Starbucks with friends or to fill the gas tank or to save for college. "I get to see what life will be like when I'm 25 or 30," the high school sophomore says.

Barbara Hagenbaugh reports on economic issues for USA TODAY.