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Can Doing Too Much of a Good Thing Actually Be a Bad Thing?

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Opinion Piece

As someone with a Type A personality, I've never believed that less is more. More often than not, I'm a "yes" person. I always say yes to extra study sessions, joining new clubs, attending talks, and helping out wherever I can. Recently, I've found myself saying "no" to things like lunch dates with friends or movie nights, just to get ahead in school and spend as much time as I can studying. There is a certain stigma, especially in the STEM field, that if you aren't overworking then you aren't working at all. Overworking can quickly lead to a phenomenon known as "burnout." I have been thinking a lot about the concept of burnout, especially in college students. Older generations say college is the time of your life; the most fun four years you'll ever have. What is it about academia that is slowly changing this "fun" mindset? How can burnout be prevented? What *is* burnout anyways?

Burnout is classified by the [Mayo Clinic](#) as a special type of work-related stress — "A state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity." [A study done in 2015](#) on burnout among university students, further defined it as a relationship of hostility and alienation between the person and their job, which in this case is being a student. Being a student is so much more than going to class and doing well in school (though this is important). It involves being an active member of clubs, having a job, getting internships, volunteering hours, attending talks or conferences... the list goes on. It is certainly a lot to manage, and can easily become overwhelming, which is the perfect breeding ground for burnout to occur.

Causes of burnout are lack of control, overworking, stress, and the pressure of the more cutthroat environment of today's education. As a student in their third year of school, I can attest to this. Programs are extremely competitive, classmates feel as though they are in this constant battle against each other for internships and job opportunities. For some, this aggressive mindset is what seems to be taking the joy out of learning. Burnout can start from good intentions. For example, one can be extremely passionate about their degree of study, pouring every aspect of themselves into their work. Overtime, they become exhausted, overworked, stressed, and have lost not only their passion, but their identity. Burnout as a young person can even predict how well an individual will function in their work environment.

Additionally, burnout can negatively affect a student's performance in terms of grades, engagement, and overall well-being.

It is fair to say the opposite of burnout can be just as detrimental. A complete lack of care or significance for your degree of study is equally harmful. It can lead to poor grades and low motivation both in and out of the classroom. So, where is the middle ground? What exactly is the sweet spot where a student can work just hard enough without feeling overworked? Unfortunately, there is no formula for this. It is solely dependent on the individual and their work ethic. However, there are a few basic tools to help prevent burnout if you feel like you're on the edge. So now what?

- The first thing to do is prioritize. Prioritizing allows you to focus on what is important first, but allows you to leave room for fun after completing your necessary tasks.
- In order to increase productivity while decreasing stress, there is a technique called “closing loops.” This is a more advanced version of prioritizing. Your [open loops](#), as defined by David Allen, are things pulling at your attention that don't belong where they are, the way they are. Think of this as having a huge to-do list, except it's physically impossible to complete. In order to close your loops, the idea is to “delete, delegate, defer, and do” to each of your loops. This makes you think critically while making lists, both short and long term, to help you complete important tasks at hand.
- [Workplace strategies for mental health](#) recommends developing a self-care plan. This can include journaling, yoga, meditation, exercise, or reading.
- Assessing how you feel on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis is also integral for preventing burnout in the future, let alone recovering from a current one.
- Lastly, reaching out to a professional, such as a counselor or therapist, who can help you work through your feelings and develop a strategy for overcoming them.

At Duquesne, we are lucky enough to have the Counseling and Wellbeing Center on our campus. Their services include, but are certainly not limited to: personal counseling, group therapy, programs/workshops, and an interfaith meditation room. Many other universities provide similar services, and should be taken advantage of when necessary.

Feeling stressed or overwhelmed is common, especially as a college student. Ultimately, listening to your mind and body (saying “no” to that extra club and saying “yes” to movie nights) will help put yourself at ease. Next time you're feeling overwhelmed, grab a fuzzy blanket, a book, a movie, or a couple of friends, and give yourself the break you deserve.

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