



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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MY TAKE

Actively Engaged or Overly Committed?

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Like most instructors, we have understood our students' involvement in extracurricular activities as a sign of their interest in and commitment to the university community, and as signs of a balanced attitude toward life. But do our students do too much?

Recently we became aware that this healthy interest in things outside of academe might have a downside. During a focus group discussing the influence of academic work on our students' lives outside the classroom, the conversation turned to the topic of extracurricular activities. The participants, undergraduates from several schools at the University, seemed largely to agree with the comments of one student who said, "I think at U.Va. there is a lot of pressure to do more than just your academics. It is not okay to just do your studies. There is a lot of pressure to fill your schedule until you are overwhelmed—a widespread belief that if you don't do things, you won't be happy." A few students disagreed, saying that their activities provided an important "outlet," and that they wanted to take advantage of as many great opportunities as they could. When asked if they felt pressure to be active, they all agreed to varying degrees, noting that most of the pressure came from "the community" and "other students." One

student called U.Va. the "land of super achievers."

It certainly seems so. While this is something that the University rightfully acknowledges with pride, it also has a downside. One consequence of the pressure to become involved is that the students feel they must do more to receive recognition. Moreover, many believe that they are continually being evaluated. One student said, "I wish...that my activities were my own."

Surprised by those comments, we decided to find out more. According to a March 2001 report by the U.Va. Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies ("How Undergraduates Spend Their Time," http://www.virginia.edu/~iaas/reports/repo_rthome.htm), most U.Va. students are extensively involved in activities outside of their academic studies. Here are sample data on third-year students' average levels of activity:

- 91% spend 8.4 hours a week on extracurricular activities
- 84% spend 6.1 hours a week engaging in sports and exercise
- 49% spend 4.4 hours a week volunteering

Compared with students at other colleges and universities, U.Va. students seem to do significantly more. Our fourth-years say they spend about 8 hours a week on extracurricular activities, while seniors at seven other institutions in the Association of American Universities and students at 276 national

colleges and universities said they spent about half that. Given these numbers, it isn't surprising that some students feel pressure to be involved and, perhaps, to overcommit themselves.

Considering these data, it is clear that, as instructors, we need to think carefully not only about the advice we give our students, but also about some of our casual comments concerning their activities. What message do we want to send? Is it all about external achievement or do we encourage personal fulfillment? We do not mean to suggest that we should discourage our students from participating in activities, but rather that we should encourage them to find a sustainable

balance. We need to listen to the way our students talk about their activities, encourage them to pursue those they really care about and to say no to others. This may be especially true for high-achieving students. For all of our students, perhaps the most important message we can send them is that we care about them as whole, well-rounded persons.

With this issue Teaching Concerns launches a new column that offers contributors the opportunity to present their personal viewpoints about teaching issues. The following essay stems from a recent Undergraduate Student Focus Group meeting convened by the TRC. Please send us your take on teaching issues.