Your university Experience—The Next Step

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Effective Use of Time

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Time is the great equalizer. Whether you are smart or dumb, ugly or beautiful, you have the same 168 hours each week that everyone else has. How you spend that valuable commodity determines the quality of your life, just as surely as if you walked into a store and ordered it.

You have probably already noticed that time passes more quickly for you than it once did. Those endless hours and days of childhood slip away by adolescence, and adulthood brings an ever-increasing acceleration. Whether you are 18 and just beginning college or 26 and managing a full-time job while going to college or 45 and returning to a campus after a long absence, you may fall prey to the conviction that you have enough time to do everything, enough time to forgo planning. A dangerous self-deception. One of the purposes of college is to determine which people can control their time in order to meet their goals. College graduates with professional jobs structure their own time and often the tasks as well. A hidden requirement for success in college and in the professional world is the desire and the ability to use time wisely. Such a skill is not instantly conferred on graduation, but it is slowly and painfully constructed throughout the college years.

Time management is one of those phrases that many people respond to emotionally. Either it engenders guilt because we feel we never complete what we should, or it creates panic because we do not want to feel trapped in a prison of schedules. How to find the path to balance, the place of reaching our goals in a way that is nurturing to our spirit, is the subject of hundreds of books and seminars every year. Many topics already mentioned in this text can help you find that place of balance, and we hope the following information will also help you adopt a wise use of your time, a balance between structure and freedom.

Driving and Resisting Forces

In the battlefield of time use, two forces repeatedly fight each other. Driving forces are those ambitions that we have to achieve and to acquire. The desires we feel arise from deep within us. Some examples are our vision of our quality world, our identity of who we are and what we want to be, our purpose or where we want to go in life, our priorities, our integrity or honor, our accomplishments, and our balance of wants and shoulds. Ideally, an important aspect of our driving forces is self-care (e.g., those activities such as exercise, rest, play, time with people we love, meditation, prayer). Make no mistake, such activities help us renew ourselves so we can fulfill our vision of our quality world, a world of health and balance.

Standing opposed to the driving forces are resisting forces—an array of impediments, circumstances, and mind-sets that hamper, and sometimes stop, our efforts to achieve. Merrill (1987) names some of these resisting forces: too many things to do, fatigue, conflicting wants/shoulds, not enough time or money, demands/expectations of others or lack of cooperation from others, lack of purpose and goals, unclear values and confused priorities, and lack of organization. To these we can add low self-esteem

105
and life crises. Good time use techniques diminish the effect of these resisting forces because they strengthen our drives and our coping abilities. Clarity about the circumstances that are our particular opponents helps us design the time plan that will enable us to reach our goals.

### Productive versus Counterproductive Use of Time

How we spend our time determines the quality of our lives (Merill, 1987). That expenditure of time can be roughly divided into two categories: productive and counterproductive. If we have considered what we want our lives to be as well as who we want to be, then our goals should flow from those considerations. When we act in ways that support and further our goals, whether they are academic, occupational, personal, social, spiritual, physical, or artistic, then we are using time productively. Since most of us are ambitious, we may have so many goals that we have to prioritize, and it becomes seductively easy to focus on those activities that seem time urgent or immediately rewarding, such as test, social activities, and family needs. Thus, we may delay, or forgo, the activities that give us long-term benefit, such as rest, exercise, play, or those activities that maintain a balanced life, such as doing laundry, paying bills, shopping for groceries. Renewal activities also include finding the major that truly fits, planning/organizing, building relationships, meaningful work, flow experiences, meditation.

The concept of counterproductive time is only too familiar for most of us. Some obvious examples are working extra shifts during the semester and missing class/study time, taking a long weekend before several tests or finals, vegging in front of the TV, overindulging in computer games, alcohol/drugs, and parties. We usually realize when we are using time counterproductively because we feel guilty. It may not be possible to completely eliminate counterproductive use of time, but it is extremely important to limit it so it does not interfere with the quality of our lives. Self-regulation helps us maintain that limit through awareness, accountability, and action.

Crisis interfere with our best intentions because they require an enormous amount of time. Preventable crises include bank overdrafts, bad hangovers, car breakdowns due to poor maintenance, sleeping through your alarm and missing a test, not saving your computer document before printing and then losing it all. Doing what needs to be done in a timely way is the best defense against preventable crises. Another type of crisis, however, is not preventable. Whether it is a serious illness, accident, divorce, death—these and other catastrophic events can disrupt our lives and our academic work. As students, it is important to contact the campus Dean of Students office or the Counseling Center immediately for help in negotiating the best means of completing your academic work for the term.

Living well means that we strive to live productively as much as we can. Organizing and managing our time well means that we increase the amount of time spent productively. This task is difficult because the resisting forces mentioned above tend to push us toward wasting time. The uneasy feeling we get when we know we are not taking care of ourselves mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually is the clear indication we are not living in ways congruent with our goals.

### Monitoring Your Time

Monitoring your time can be a powerful tool to help you become more successful with self-regulation. This exercise will take you one full week to complete and it is in two parts. Completing this exercise will help you see trends in your time usage so that you can make appropriate adjustments.
Part I: Time Monitor

Keep track of how you spend your time for a week by completing the Weekly Time Monitor. At least three times a day, take a few minutes to update the time monitor to ensure accuracy in recording (it is all too easy to overestimate the amount of time you study and to underestimate how long you spend doing everything else). A blank copy of this form is provided at the end of this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly Time Monitor</th>
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<td>6:00-7:00</td>
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Once you have recorded how you spend your time for seven days, add up the number of hours you spent in each of the following categories (note: there are 168 hours in one week):

- Sleep
- Class
- Study
- Meals
- Family
- Work
- Commute
- Exercise
- Personal hygiene
- Meetings
- Spiritual
- Television
- Computer/games
- Social
- Other: ______
- Other: ______

107
Part II: Use of Time

Once you have analyzed your completed time monitor; place your week's activities into the three boxes below. Estimate how much of your time was spent in each of the three categories (how many hours)? Then estimate the percentage of total time you spent in each category for the week (___ % of 168 hours).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCTIVE</th>
<th>COUNTERPRODUCTIVE</th>
<th>CRISIS</th>
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What changes, if any, would you like to accomplish in your use of time?

Underlying Assumptions for Time Management

Many time management systems have appeared in the past 50 years. They exist in paper format, personal digital assistants (PDAs), day planners, computer programs. However different they may appear on the surface, all share the same assumptions. Whatever format you choose, be aware of the following assumptions.

Assumption #1. Time management systems start with vision and goals. We have spoken in this text about our quality world and the goals that can emerge from our vision of how and who we want to be. Discerning our goals and checking them by the criteria of belief, realism, desire, and measurement allow us to build a strong foundation for effective time management.

Assumption #2. We are the managers, not the slaves, of our time. Although some of our time each day is fixed, such as work, class, and commuting time, we do control most of the rest of our time. We actively choose what we do and when we do it. Some simple examples are when we get up and when we go to bed; when and how long we eat; when we run errands or do household chores; when and how long we study, play, vegetate, etc.

Assumption #3. We focus on clear and truthful prioritization of tasks. What has the most importance? It is normal to have pressing tasks in several areas of your life, especially if you are working at a job outside of school and/or you have children. Whether you make a list or write the tasks on a series of Post-it notes, it is imperative that you decide the level of importance of each task. Once you have decided the priority and labeled or numbered the items, then you can ask the question posed in Assumption #4.
Assumption #4. We ask ourselves, What is the best use of my time right now? (Lakeln, 1973, p. 90). Holding this question in the back of our minds helps us realize when we are procrastinatilng, when we are overwhelmed, when we are confronted by a crisis that interrupts our time plan. Sometimes the best use of our time is to help a friend, or to take a nap; sometimes it is to study the subject we like least because the test is tomorrow. What is the best use of my time right now? puts the questions of priorities and flexibility foremost in your thinking.

Creating the Right Plan

"Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now" (Lakeln, 1973, p. 25). However, our plan has to be the right plan for us or it will not work. To create the right plan, we have to answer the following questions:

What are my goals? When we determine to use time wisely, it is crucial to look at the goals we have in every facet of our lives—personal, academic, social, occupational, family, athletic, spiritual. They comprise what we value. The right plan encompasses the goals from all areas of our lives.

As emphasized in the previous chapter, our list of goals needs to be achievable; for example, I will make a GPA of 3.0 on the 13 hours I am taking this semester or I will complete a career search so that I will choose my major by January or I will meet at least three new people each week or I will spend at least an hour each school night helping my son with his math homework. Obviously, those goals need to be your goals, not someone else's. If we write our goals down and put them where we can see them frequently, they will help our motivation.

What are my priorities among those goals? Covey (1989) promotes first things first as a mantra for good time use. In simple terms, that means paying bills before watching TV, studying before going to the movie, spending time with your significant other before hanging out with friends, getting to work early, etc. A good time/task plan helps us set and meet priorities.

What support, supplies, and circumstances do I need to accomplish those goals? A good time/task plan will help you get to a needed tutoring or study session on time; it will allocate study time during the day; it will help you manage the numerous errands, phone calls, and mail to manage your life and your family.

What will be the cost to accomplish those goals—the price tag? A good plan helps us be honest about what we have to give up to accomplish our goals. We may have to relinquish watching sports on television or time with extended family or pleasure reading. It may mean quick meals rather than elaborate dinners. It may mean less PTA or church work. It may mean using breaks and holidays to catch up on studying.

How can I establish a time plan that will work for me? We believe that most people fall into two categories of feelings about using time. Either we need the sense of safety that structure provides or we need the sense of freedom that structure inhibits. People who enjoy structure are usually Js (Judging) and those who enjoy freedom are Ps (Perceiving). In simplistic terms, people with a preference for structure/safety usually are comfortable with time-use planning. In fact, sometimes they spend much of their time planning and do not complete the tasks. By contrast, people with a preference for freedom often fight the idea of planning, thinking erroneously that a time-use plan is a jail.

In reality, both types of people need a good time plan, but they need different types of time plans. However, both need time plans that include a list of goals, a semester calendar, a to-do list, and a weekly planner. We've recommended constructing an academic calendar listing all your academic
commitments. Now we are adding several more pieces to that original concept to give you a complete system. Such a system combines all the facets of your life in one place.

**To-Do List**

A to-do list is a simple and highly effective daily strategy. You may write it in a daily planner, on a notepad, or on a Post-it note. It is a list of the tasks that should be completed during the next day or week; these tasks are separate from the normally scheduled times of class, work, meals, and sleep. A to-do list is always changing as you check off those things you have completed and add new tasks. Sometimes you may have enough tasks that you will need to prioritize by marking some as As (top priority), Bs, etc.

**Daily or Weekly Planner**

Using a daily or weekly planner is a good way to integrate your goals, academic calendar, to-do list, and specific schedule for the week all in one place. We recommend that you use 15–20 minutes on Sunday afternoon or evening to schedule the next week in your planner, noting any specific conflicts. Here are some guidelines for keeping a weekly planner:

- Transfer academic commitments, such as classes, labs, tutoring, study groups, from your academic calendar. Note any due dates for tests or projects that are upcoming in the next two weeks.
- Mark study times, allocating one to three hours per class hour, depending on the difficulty of the class for you. It is more productive to do one- or two-hour study sessions than marathon sessions of five or more hours.
- Set realistic goals for studying; for example, estimate how much time you think you will need and then add another 50 percent.
- Set specific starting and stopping times or beginning and ending points for accomplishing academic tasks.
- Mark the hours you are at work, including drive time.
- List social or family plans, including dates, parties, and meetings.
- If you have regularly scheduled exercise and/or meditation time, enter it on the planner.
- Plan for some downtime; such personal time is necessary for rest and refreshment.
- Make sure you have some time each day that is not allocated. This time is what you will need to handle the unexpected crises of work, children, car repairs, etc.
- Reflect on how much time you have allocated for renewal activities.

**Technology Aids**

Laptops, PDAs, electronic address books, and microrecorders are some of the hardware tools available now, and scheduling software is common on most desktops. All cost money and time in learning how to use and maintain them. As your life becomes more complex, especially if you are comfortable with technology, you may find that electronic scheduling is helpful. However, "even the best tool is
no substitute for vision, judgment, creativity, character, or competence" (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994, p. 327).

**Personality Type and Time**

Just as our temperaments affect procrastination, they also affect how we relate to time management and academic tasks.

**Introversion.** Introverts prefer to study alone; it is easy for them to put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door; they can say no to friends and family; they do not allow voice mail or email messages to interrupt their study. Introverts have a talent for protecting themselves so they can work, but they sometimes avoid study groups.

**Extraversion.** Extroverts often prefer being with other people, so it is more difficult for them to isolate themselves to study. They tend to answer the phone or allow distractions to interrupt their study. Extroverts often have a talent for multitasking.

**Perceiving.** People with a preference for perceiving (freedom) have a talent for adapting to the moment and believing that things will work out, resist the idea that we should control time, tend to start projects at the last minute, and work well under pressure. They often disregard their schedule and prefer working for immediate gratification. Studying, except last-minute cramming, rarely has immediate gratification, so academic timeliness is often difficult. They prefer to play first, then work.

**Judging.** People with a preference for judging (structure) need a detailed schedule to function well; they prefer to work first, then play. They either want to be in control or want someone else to be in control. They do not like being caught unprepared at the last minute. They tend to use waiting time (before class or waiting in line) productively, get things ready the night before, and are aware of when their best study times are. They often study the most difficult courses first and then use studying their favorite course as a reward. They are often comfortable working for delayed gratification, rather than immediate.

**Balancing Our Lives**

The challenge of modern life, either as a college student or a working professional, is to manage the time we have so that we reach our goal of a quality life—a quality life that incorporates what we want to achieve both personally and professionally. It is not an easy task for anyone to navigate the balance between doing what we should do for long-term goals (delayed gratification) and doing what we want to do right now (immediate gratification). Obviously, we benefit if we use vision rooted in our quality world, develop both long-term and short-term goals based on that vision, and manage our daily lives in a thoughtful manner.

"Balancing is the discipline that gives us flexibility. Extraordinary flexibility is required for successful living in all spheres of activity" (Peck, 1978, p. 64). Sometimes a good method for developing balance
is to look at the characteristics of people who are our opposite in relation to the structure/freedom preference. What can we learn from those who are so different from us? If we prefer structure, we may need to learn to incorporate more play into our lives (but we are almost sure to schedule it!). If we prefer freedom, we may need to use a planner for schoolwork and personal tasks (even though it may be a struggle initially).

Let us now look at some specific examples of students who can move toward greater balance in their lives:

Maria is an international student who has come to the United States to study computer science. She is so determined to succeed that she studies every moment that she is not working at her campus job. She has made few friends and seems anxious and worried.
**Remedy:** Maria realizes that she will benefit from joining at least one campus organization and giving herself one hour a day to listen to music and relax.

Jim is a single parent with an eight-year-old daughter. He works 25 hours a week and carries four courses. His day is nonstop from 6 A.M. to 9 P.M., as he juggles caring for his child, doing schoolwork, and working at his job. He feels exhausted and worries that he is on an endless treadmill.
**Remedy:** Jim begins to examine the resources in his extended family and the community for child care to allow him some time to himself, for both study and recreation.

Kimberly is enjoying every aspect of college. She loves living on campus, and her room is always full of friends. The television is usually on as well as instant messaging on her computer. She has good intentions about exercising and study, but often finds herself at the end of the day with few tasks accomplished.
**Remedy:** Kimberly realizes that she cannot study in her room because it has far too many distractions. Her first priority becomes studying enough to maintain her scholarship, so she schedules study time at the library immediately after her afternoon classes. She finds a quiet study carrel, away from the elevators and walkways. She completes her studies before she goes back to the dorm. After a few weeks, she feels that her study behaviors are stable, so she schedules two workout sessions each week in the campus gym.

David is a junior who lives off campus. He enrolls in at least 16 hours each term and is vice president of the student government association. He also participates in a professional organization for his major. He feels anxious most of the time because there are so many details to remember. Most important, he never feels that he is doing anything well.
**Remedy:** David begins to use a planner to help him remember the multitude of tasks. However, he also reevaluates his goals and makes some important changes. He turns down the offer of a leadership role in the professional organization, preferring just to participate as a member. He schedules time to play his guitar several times a week; it is an activity that he used to enjoy. He decides to take a break during the summer and work rather than take extra courses to graduate early.

Balance leads to inner harmony: "It is the selection of appropriate and realistic goals congruent with inner values. It is the resolution of wants and shoulds. It is the balance of work, family, community and personal priorities" (Merrill, 1987, p. 41).