

# Students working harder, longer to earn tuition money

**Minnesota college students work long hours, have less time to study and rely on credit cards to pay tuition and books, a recent study shows.**

Students are working long hours, having less time to study and resorting to credit cards to pay educational expenses, a survey conducted for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system shows.

In the first snapshot of how Minnesota State Colleges and Universities students manage their educational debt, the study reveals several alarming trends.

"This study shows a great number of our students must overcome large obstacles to earn post-secondary degrees," said Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Chancellor James H. McCormick. "To ensure Minnesota has a well-educated citizenry and workforce, we should make it easier - not harder - for them. Without adequate support for higher education, we're headed in the wrong direction."

Conducted in February, the survey found students are:

Working many hours to pay college expenses. More than 81 percent of the system's students surveyed work. Over half of these students work at least 30 hours a week while attending college. That includes 17 percent who said they work more than 40 hours a week. Full-time students work an average of nearly 28 hours a week, and part-time students work an average of 36 hours a week.

Largely bearing the financial burden alone. Only one-quarter of those surveyed said their parents pay some or all of their educational expenses. About 95 percent reported their parents are not helping them repay their student loans.

Having less time to study because they must work so much. More than six out of 10 students said that working limits their study time. Nearly 40 percent said working prevented them from enrolling in at least one course they wanted to take.

Delaying their studies. About 17 percent of the students interviewed said they have stopped taking all courses for at least one semester to earn more money for educational expenses. Research on what is known as "student persistence" shows that many students who "stop out" ultimately do not complete their studies.

Resorting to credit cards for tuition and fees, books and supplies. Even though they may pay high interest rates, a quarter of the students reported they used credit cards to pay a portion of tuition and fees this semester. More than one-third (37 percent) used credit cards for other educational expenses, such as books, supplies or special equipment. Most of these students said they will not be able to pay off their credit card balances while taking classes this semester, further increasing the cost of a higher education.

Credit cards often carry interest rates of 18 to 20 percent while interest rates for student loans available through government programs are usually between 2 and 4 percent. However, students are limited in how much they can borrow each year through government programs. Loan limits are set by law. For example, an undergraduate classified as financially independent cannot borrow more than \$6,625 through a government loan program for the first year of study.

"These findings dispel the commonly held idea that parents provide substantial financial support to the students in this system. Our students do not expect a free ride and work hard to create better futures," McCormick said.

The telephone survey of 615 students currently enrolled in one or more of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities was conducted by Noel-Levitz, a nationally recognized research firm. The sample was scientifically selected to represent the system's students. Results confirm findings of an earlier study that showed students are borrowing heavily. The earlier study, completed in December 2004, found that during the past two years, 30 percent more students have taken out loans to help pay for college, and their total borrowing rose by 60 percent.

"The new study also raises several academic concerns," said Linda Baer, senior vice chancellor for academic and student affairs. "The picture that emerges from this survey is one of students who are overworked and worried about their growing debt load.

"As an educator, I can tell you this is not good news. To receive the most educational value, students must have enough energy and time to apply themselves to their studies," Baer said. "Considering the rigors of working so many hours, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that some students are getting Bs and Cs when they should be getting As and Bs."

Students expressed the same concern. Altogether, 17 percent of the students said they expected to earn higher grades than they are actually earning. The survey also shows that a quarter of the students report they have reduced their degree goals because they worry about mounting debts.

Lauren Hall, 20, of Faribault, a third-year student in criminal justice corrections at Winona State University, worries about repaying her loans. Already carrying \$16,000 in student debt, she faces one and a half more years of educational expenses. "I am worried about the future because I don't know how much income I'll be making as a juvenile probation officer," she said.

She said her family is unable to provide any financial assistance. Though she qualified for a state grant and federally subsidized student loans to help pay tuition and fees, she has to rely on a credit card at 18 percent interest to buy her books each semester. That's about \$400 each semester. Currently, she takes six courses and works 22 hours a week in a warehouse.

Balancing the demands of working and studying is particularly challenging for first-generation college students, those whose parents did not attend college. About 40 percent of the system's students are the first-generation students, the survey shows. They are more likely than other students to indicate that they have scaled back their degree goals. First-generation college students are most likely to be females attending a system institution in the Twin Cities on a part-time basis, the survey shows. Also, they are more likely to be students

of color.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system comprises 32 state universities and community and technical colleges serving the higher education needs of Minnesota. The system serves about 240,000 students per year in credit-based courses and an additional 130,000 students in non-credit courses.