

The Compulsion to Feel Productive

Produced by Lauren MacDonald, Tommy Hodgkins, Bertram Zhai, and Kate Riccio

Opening

[Audio clips of college students talking about all of their commitments over each other]

Host: Google measures productivity in terms of the rate of output per unit of input.” How do I, as a student, measure how productive I am? If my unit of input is my time as a student, then the output could be described as how many activities I do—the more I do, the more productive I am. But for college students, can this obsession be a barrier to success? At what point does it begin to affect mental health and well-being? During this pivotal period in between the hustle of high school responsibilities and the grind of the 9-5 corporate world, we often find ourselves victims of the national cultural obsession with productivity – and the intense academic environment at UVA is doing little to solve the problem.

Intro

[Theme song begins]

Host: Welcome to U OK UVA?, a student-produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I’m your host, Tommy Hodgkins, and in this episode, I will be exploring the compulsion to feel productive and its effect on the mental health of students at UVA.

Host: Mental health problems among children have steadily been on the rise in recent years, with anxiety increasing 27% among children and 24% among adolescents from 2016 to 2019. How does a college setting feed into this cycle of compulsive productivity and resulting mental illness? In this podcast, I sit down with upperclassmen of all years to get their perspectives on this question and hear them reflect on their experiences. Though this issue is prevalent among students, it’s not usually talked about – why is it so normalized as part of our culture?

Host: As a member of the class of 2024 just months away from graduation, I use this episode to frame this as a problem, and hope to generate solutions for future classes.

[Theme song fades out]

National Issue

Host: In my conversations with students at UVA, I found that there is an innate pressure to overschedule yourself with classes, activities, and leadership positions – and for many, this stems from habits formed in high school. Teens who may feel pressure to get into a good college often fill their days with extracurriculars like intramural sports, tutoring, and music lessons. But this tendency for students to overextend themselves can create chronic stress that contributes to mental health problems like depression and anxiety. To some extent, these patterns aren't new; many parents of gen-Zers have been enrolling their kids in as many activities as they can as early as possible. This creates a learned expectation that overbooking is the standard.

[Audio clips of newscasters talking about overscheduling in young children]

Newscaster 1: “Parents and kids are non stop these days. Sports, music lessons, extracurricular activities, oh my. But how much is too much? New studies show overbooking our kids might actually be doing more harm than good.”

Newscaster 2: “What about a little free time for little kids? Children’s days are often packed with classes, everything from art to music to sports to language lessons, the list goes on... today we ask, is it healthy for little children to be booked solid?”

Newscaster 3: “Research proves that kids today are busier than ever before with homework, sports, music lessons, and lots of other outside activities. So how can parents help kids find balance and reduce the stress that it causes?”

Commentary

Host: This intense mentality is often solidified in high school. The pressure of college applications causes many to join a long list of extracurriculars just to fill their resume. That mindset is difficult to break free of in college – especially given the worldwide pandemic that kept students isolated in dorms with little exposure to the quote-unquote “college experience.” Though the pandemic drastically shifted the trajectory of all college students’ experiences, the class of 2024 may have been hit the hardest. With COVID-19 in full swing during my first year, students were forced to stay in dorms or even at home. Restrictions like limiting capacity to five people in a room and requiring students to get tested once a week were part of larger University efforts to slow the spread of the virus. Yet, these limitations made it difficult for first years to get involved and make UVA feel like home. Once restrictions began to lift, classes, social activities and clubs became available for students to engage in and make up for lost time.

Gretchen: “Hi, my name is Gretchen. I’m a fourth year and I am double majoring in Psychology and Youth and Social Innovation. At UVA, I’m involved in “if You're Reading This”, which is a

mental health organization, TEDX UVA, I'm a part of 4th year trustees, I'm in a sorority, I've worked in 2 different labs doing different psychology research, and I'm also a part of Hoos Connected."

Host: Gretchen is known for being hardworking, motivated, and determined when it comes to her schoolwork. She gives her 100% to everyone she meets, whether she knows them or not. But above all else, she's warm, inviting, thoughtful, and always knows how to cheer up those around her.

Host: As a fourth year now, she's reflecting back on her last 4 years and thinking more about how she used to overload her schedule. She has learned strategies to handle all of her commitments. During her first year, like her peers, Gretchen had all online classes as a result of the pandemic. So she made it a priority to get as involved as possible as soon as she was able. Losing this precious time made her want to take every opportunity that was given to her.

Gretchen: "I was so excited. I had never had an in-person class my entire first year, so diving into second year, I was really excited to just get that classic college experience and I was excited to finally put faces to names I was seeing on my zoom screen and interact with professors in person. So I was definitely really excited for the school aspect, but I was also really excited for the social aspect to be meeting new people through different clubs and activities and taking advantage of everything that you have to offer me in person."

Host: Along with this excitement for the real college experience, Gretchen also felt overwhelmed. She felt compelled to fill every moment of her schedule.

Gretchen: "Yeah, I think there definitely was some pressure because we had lost out on that one year to try to join as much as possible. That makes sense because I hadn't realized how much time Zoom had taken out of the equation.

Host: Many students who were impacted by the pandemic feel similarly to Gretchen. The class of 2024 was plagued with this compulsion to be over-productive as a result of COVID, but these feelings also persist across the rest of the student body.

[Music with fast drum beat]

Second Year

Host: This overload of activities and productivity isn't just found within those affected by covid. Second year is a time when students are still involved in a lot of things related to their classes, but also starting to become more invested in extracurriculars. Balancing these commitments with free time can be hard, and can lead to tough decisions on how to use this free time.

Evan: "I feel like my drive to be productive almost comes from a FOMO aspect and I feel like if I'm not being super studious, or if I'm not working out, or if I'm not going out, I'm missing out on what other people are doing or I'm falling behind so I think it's almost like a similar drive."

Host: That was Evan Bauer, a second-year majoring in economics and foreign affairs.

Evan: "At UVA specifically, there's definitely a work hard play hard culture, and everyone is so driven to be productive and go out and do all these things. And I think that kind of general culture definitely informs my personal need to be productive."

Evan: "I think if other people valued it less, I would probably value it less. And so I feel like my desire to do social activities and stuff like that is definitely shaped by other people's values, not only my own."

Host: The compulsion to feel productive in an environment where multiple kinds of productivity are valued can be harmful to a student's mental health. It can be a double-edged sword, according to Evan, where there's a struggle to balance feelings of unproductiveness and feelings of burnout.

Evan: "I get super anxious if I don't go to the gym enough, or if I if everyone else is going out, and I'm sitting at home, but also I feel like there's an inverse that where, if I am too drawn into those things that I feel like burnt out, and I get some... anxiety out of that, too."

Host: The deadline to declare a major comes at the end of second year. This increases the pressure on students to decide which specific career paths they may pursue. When you reach fourth year and have some distance from second year, it's easy to reflect on the tendency to overcommit yourself to a slew of extracurriculars. It's also easy to recognize the lack of consideration for your own mental health. At the moment, though, it's easy to get carried away with all of your commitments at the expense of your mental wellbeing.

Gretchen: "I honestly think second year I was mainly just super excited and the stuff I was joining, I didn't have a leadership position in yet. I think now reflecting on my 4th year, I didn't need to join as much. I think this year I might be a little bit overextended just because of the activities you join in your first and second year."

Host: Gretchen also highlights that your involvements don't necessarily have to align with what you want to do after college. Instead, they can give you an opportunity to form meaningful relationships.

Gretchen: I guess TedX, which I love, I'm like on the outreach committee, which is something different than I had done before, but I think that's kind of the club that I do for fun. It doesn't go

along with like, a major specific thing I want to do in the future, but I think no matter what it builds good skills and I've loved the people I've met, so it's worth that.”

Host: When asked about her overall takeaways from second year, Gretchen reflected on her efforts to attempt to assimilate to UVA. Like many others in her class, this happened later than normal.

Gretchen: “I feel like my biggest advice from second year is something that a lot of other grades that now are coming into UVA and didn't experience COVID is just taking advantage of every opportunity that's given to you and attending all the UVA traditional things I think is really important and makes you feel like a part of the community. ”

Host: Whether it be a football game, Lighting of the Lawn, or Rotunda Sing, the strong sense of community at UVA is clear with these traditions. And for the class of 2024, second-year was the time to take advantage of that. Second year meant stepping out of your comfort zone and embracing your community. It meant taking fun classes and trying out new clubs. With future internships so far in the distance, it's easy to put professional goals on the back burner. By third-year, however, the clock is ticking. At this point, most students have a better sense of how to balance different opportunities and commitments. But the added stress of getting an internship and potential future job offer leaves many still caving to that pressure to overbook.

[Clock work noise with alarm going off]

Third Year

Host: Caroline Pratt, a third-year student majoring in psychology and minoring in entrepreneurship, transferred to UVA from a small liberal arts school. She was immediately thrown into an environment where students work just as hard toward their extracurriculars as they do in the classroom.

Host: As a third year involved in Club Swim and the Women's Business Forum, Caroline is managing these extracurriculars on top of trying to secure an internship for the next summer. For many students, third-year means engaging in interviews and surveying potential career paths. It means meeting with advisors and making connections on LinkedIn. For some, it even means searching for a summer internship that may result in a return offer for a job after graduation. It's not uncommon for these stressors to contribute to the culture of compulsive productivity that hinges on academic success. Caroline voices this mindset regarding career goals.

Caroline: “But, me being the person that I am, I wanna do well, like most Uva students. I think I will always worry in the back of my mind.”

Host: For Caroline, third-year academic stress has forced her to master his balance. In other words, she's learned to focus on herself, and not worry about what others are doing.

Caroline: “In high school I was very on 24-7 constantly going through the motions and working really hard. I think I still do that, but it’s more intentional. In high school I took a lot of classes I wasn’t necessarily interested in and had to take, so in that way in college I feel more productive because I’m doing things that relate more to my interests and what I wanna do in my future.”

Host: Gretchen agrees that she gained fulfillment from finally taking classes she was interested in. However, she found that it can come with tons of stress and an unhealthy tendency to compare herself to her peers.

Gretchen: “I just started to feel kind of older and that I needed to start thinking more seriously about my future. So I remember in the fall of the third year, all my friends that were going into the consulting sector or a lot of business jobs, were finding internships almost immediately. Really, internships that would then turn into their full time jobs. So I think I started to feel pressure on that side of things too, not even just getting involved at school but trying to figure out what I wanted to do post school too. Which added another dimension of stress.

Host: When comparing her second and third years here at UVA, As time went on, she was better at aligning her extracurriculars with what she was truly passionate about. This allowed her to devote more time to what she enjoyed and what came more naturally to her.

Gretchen: “Once you have your major straightened out, it can be really easy for your extracurriculars to kind of take hold of your life at UVA. My brother was three years older than me. He was a fourth year student when I was a first year. And I remember calling him a lot my third year to discuss, like everything that was going on. And he would always joke that at UVA for a lot of kids like school is their extracurricular and then all the clubs and organizations they're involved in are like the full time position that they're at UVA for, which I thought was interesting. And so I tried to remind myself that I was here for school. ”

[Hopeful music transition]

Fourth Year/Reflection + Takeaways Looking Back

Host: When Gretchen was given the chance to reflect back on her 4 years at UVA, she thought more about her ability to build skills that allow her to balance between her busy school schedule, her extracurriculars, and making time for her own interests. From her first year to her final year, she slowly started to understand how she could balance all these different areas of her life while also prioritizing her mental health and avoiding burnout.

Host: When asked what advice she would give her younger college self, Gretchen had an optimistic answer. She believes students who are having a tough time should try not to worry so much about productivity and keeping up with others. Instead, they should pursue things they're passionate about.

Gretchen: "I feel like I had a really tough first year just because of COVID and I think a lot of people, no matter COVID or not, have tough first years. So maybe just a reminder that things get better and it's easy at UVA to feel like everything has an application to get involved in or a really strenuous interview process. So just stick with it and not just apply to stuff just because it sounds really prestigious or you think it will help you in the future, but that you're actually interested in."

Conclusion

Host: UVA's competitive culture affects all students and it doesn't seem to be going away. As our time as fourth years is almost at a close, we draw attention to this compulsion to feel productive that everyone knows exists but refuses to recognize. As I look back as a member of the class of 2024, the lessons I learned from each year can help me handle these different sectors of my life without putting too much pressure on my mental health. Gretchen is a great example of showing us how she was able to change her mindset as she got older. This offers hope for those who may be struggling. In any case, the transition to a college lifestyle is a difficult one that requires reflection and self-awareness. Chances are the average student at UVA is tackling it by joining multiple organizations and taking a full course load of challenging courses. They do this all while trying to maintain an active social life; this can result in a packed schedule that lends itself to mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression. In attempting to break free of these habits that have been ingrained in us since we were kids, students often learn to prioritize friendships and career interests over unfulfilling resume-building activities. The process of balancing our busy schedules with our mental health is not linear and is different for everyone. Yet by keeping in mind that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, things can get easier.

Closer

[Theme song begins]

Host: This podcast was produced by Kate Riccio, Lauren MacDonald, Tommy Hodgkins, and Bertram Zhai as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript. Thanks for listening!

[Theme song fades]

Works Cited

Music:

“Freesound - Good Presentation (Loop Ver.1) by AudioCoffee.” *Freesound.org*,
freesound.org/people/AudioCoffee/sounds/709992/

Makiah Beats. “Deep End.” 2022. Free Music Archive.
https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Makiah_Beats/deep-end/

Sound Clips:

“Freesound - Timer_ringing_nr.wav by Artboy_sf.” *Freesound.org*,
freesound.org/people/artboy_sf/sounds/592422/

“Freesound - Drumline Loop 1.Wav by Incarnadine.” *Freesound.org*,
freesound.org/people/Incarnadine/sounds/19895/

“Studies Suggest Too Many Extracurricular Activities May Be Harmful to Kids.” *9NEWS*
(*KUSA*), YouTube, 7 Oct. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmfDPEX7Qvs

“Are Today’s Kids Too Busy?” *ABC News*, YouTube, 8 Nov. 2009,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGfXiw1AMYY

“The Problem of Over-Scheduling Our Kids.” *TMJ4 News*, YouTube, 14 Mar. 2016,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9Z_-O5dSRI

Research:

Trojak, Robert M, et al. “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Productivity of Workers in the Health Sector between Working in a Hospital and from Home.” *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 15, 4 Aug. 2023, pp. 5129–5129, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10420162/, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12155129>

Amy Morin, LCSW. “How You Can Help Teens When They Are Overscheduled.” *Verywell Family*, Verywell Family, 28 June 2020, www.verywellfamily.com/signs-your-teen-is-overscheduled-4083061#:~:text=Teens%20who%20feel%20a%20lot%20of%20pressure%20to,of%20mental%20health%20problems%2C%20like%20depression%20and%20anxiety