ABSTRACT

Theory and research from diverse fields including human development, economics, and sociology point to the importance of studying time use across the lifespan. Understanding time use may be especially important during the college years when students experience newfound
autonomy from parents, explore novel activities, and begin establishing adult behavior patterns. Although substantial research has documented between-person differences in college students’ time use, little theoretically-based empirical work has followed students longitudinally to explore how their time use changes developmentally across college. Furthermore, little research has explored the adjustment correlates of daily time use in order to understand the circumstances under which college students engage in healthy or harmful behaviors. Recognizing these gaps in the literature, two empirical studies were conducted exploring the predictors and adjustment implications of time spent on productive activities (academics, employment, and organized activities) among a sample of first through fourth-year college students \((n = 736)\). Students were followed for 14 consecutive days within each of 7 consecutive semesters yielding up to 98 daily diary days per student. Given the nested nature of the data, each study used a multi-level modeling strategy (days nested within semesters nested within individuals).

The first chapter drew on the time trade-off hypothesis to examine within- and between-person predictors of time spent on academics, employment and organized activities. This hypothesis predicts that increasing time in one productive domain reduces time available for other productive domains. Results demonstrated that time spent on productive activities changed as students progressed through college: Academic time was highest at the beginning and near the end of college, whereas organized activities followed an opposite pattern with a peak in the middle semesters. Employment was not common, but increased across college. Time spent on productive activities also differed depending on the day of the week and the season, with academic time being higher on weekdays and in the fall semester and organized activity time higher on weekends. In addition, time spent on productive activities varied by demographic characteristics of the student (e.g., gender, parental education, immigrant status, and race). In support of the time trade-off hypothesis, results demonstrated that on days and semesters when students spent more time on employment, they spent less time on academics. However, organized activities and academics were not linked at the semester level, suggesting that a trade-off occurs for some, but not all, productive activities.

The second empirical chapter focused on the adjustment implications of time spent on academics, employment, and organized activities. Associations of these productive activities with positive and negative mood, tiredness, and alcohol use were explored at the daily, semester, and between-person levels. On days and semesters when students spent more time on all three productive activities, they reported more tiredness. In addition, at the daily and semester level, spending more time on academics was associated with more negative affect, more time on employment was associated with less alcohol use, and more time on organized activities was associated with greater positive affect and alcohol use. Results documented complex associations that depended on the level of analysis, and at times, even within-person associations operated in opposing directions. For instance, spending more time on academics was associated with less positive affect at the daily level, but more positive affective at the semester level, suggesting that the daily and semester level indicators of time use may be capturing unique phenomena.

In sum, the overarching aim of the current study was to document correlates of time spent on productive activities among college students. Results demonstrated that associations between activities and adjustment varied by outcome domain and level of analysis suggesting that between-person studies may be inadequate to capture the complex implications of time use. Instead, attention to multiple time scales and diverse outcome domains is needed in order to best understand how time use may shape adjustment during the college years.