

2015

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## Recommended Citation

Wertheimer, Megan, "Assessing Predictors of Work Engagement in Full-Time Undergraduate Students with Part-Time Jobs" (2015). *Honors Projects*. 389.  
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Assessing Predictors of Work Engagement in Full-Time  
Undergraduate Students with Part-Time Jobs

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### Abstract

Past research has shown that work engagement is beneficial for employees and employers. It is linked with performance, job satisfaction, motivation, employee health, and well-being. We tested whether social-support, conscientiousness, generalized self-efficacy, and work/school congruency would be predictive of work engagement of full-time undergraduate students at Grand Valley State University. Findings showed that work/school congruency and perceived organizational support significantly predict work engagement. These results have implications for how student workers and their employers should seek to increase engagement.

*Keywords:* work, work engagement, undergraduate students

## Assessing Predictors of Work Engagement in Full-Time Undergraduate Students with Part-Time Jobs

Many undergraduate college students are also employees. A CBS article cites that 71% of United States undergraduate students were working in 2011 (2013). Undergraduate students usually enter college with the intent of pursuing a post-graduation career; any employment maintained while engaging in full-time study is primarily for the purpose of meeting financial requirements: tuition, rent, groceries, and other necessities (Hall, 2010). These jobs are usually recognized as temporary, easing financial burden while students work toward a desired career. A better understanding of engagement in these “stepping-stone jobs,” will lead to a better understanding of the school-work paradigm experienced by many current students.

Work engagement is defined as a positive and work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Rich, 2007). Engagement is predictive of performance and related to psychological well-being; it is mutually beneficial to the employer and the employee (Antonison, 2011; Rich, 2007). Furthermore, research has shown a positive relationship between work engagement and employee health (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011). Benefits of work engagement extend beyond well-being and health to include increased job satisfaction and motivation (Caesens, Stinglhamber, & Luybaert, 2014; Antonison, 2011).

Most research in this area focuses on work engagement in corporations employing full-time workers, often focusing on a specific occupation, such as nursing (Simpson, 2009; Tomic, 2011). Much of the research analyzes existing work engagement measures, develops/validates new work engagement measures, analyses predictive power of work engagement in performance, and analyzes work engagement’s relationship with other work constructs such as intrinsic motivation or work satisfaction (Rich, 2007; Antonison, 2011; Caesens, Stinglhamber, &

Luybaert, 2014; Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011a and 2011b; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011).

There is very little research on work engagement of employees working in part-time jobs, and even less research on students who hold those part-time jobs. The present study will fill this gap by examining engagement of working undergraduate students.

Theory-based research suggests that generalized self-efficacy, conscientiousness, work/school congruency and perceived organizational support are predictive of work engagement (Rich, 2007).

Congruency is the perceived connection between work and school. A study conducted by Dundes and Marx suggests that working undergraduate students have superior academic performance to those who do not work (2006). Previous research also indicates educational value in employment opportunities (McKechnie, Hobbs, Simpson, Anderson, Howieson, & Semple, 2010). Specifically, results suggested that demanding jobs can lead to new skills, which then benefit the working student. Thus far, these highlighted studies have provided a link between work and school performance without taking into account the factor of congruency. To include congruency in this link between work and school performance, there are qualitative data that suggest benefits of work/school congruency in the academic arena (Curtiss & Williams, 2002). A participant stated that “it helps relate theory and practice” which indicates a clear advantage of congruency between work and school—it allows for the application of academia in a professional setting (p. 8, Curtiss & Williams, 2002). This experience of real-world application may lead to a broader and clearer understanding of the topics discussed in the classroom. This study will test the reverse relationship: will work/school congruency predict work benefits, specifically work engagement?

Generalized self-efficacy, an appraisal of one's competence, has been shown to be related to proactive work behaviors such as personal initiative or taking charge (Sonnentag & Spychala, 2012). These proactive work behaviors extend beyond formal role requirements. This extension beyond what is required of the employee indicates that these individuals may put forth extra effort and exertion over their counterparts with lower generalized self-efficacy (Rich, 2007). Specifically, having a high generalized self-efficacy may lead an employee to put forth extra effort. The construct of work engagement utilized here includes exertion, cognitive and physical, as a component. This suggests that generalized self-efficacy may be a predictor of work engagement.

Conscientiousness, a factor in the five factor model of personality, is another hypothesized antecedent of work engagement (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Conscientiousness is the personality factor that captures dependability and achievement orientation (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Bakker tested the role of conscientiousness in moderating the relationship between work engagement and performance and found significant results wherein conscientiousness strengthened the relationship (2012). Additionally, research suggests that conscientious individuals exert more effort than individuals who are less conscientious (Mount & Barrick, 1996). Mental and physical exertion is a significant component of work engagement, providing support for conscientiousness as a significant predictor.

Perceived organizational support, the extent to which an employee believes an organization cares about his/her achievements and well-being, was found to be positively correlated with work engagement in a study conducted by Caesens, Stinglhamber, and Luypaert (2014). Additionally, meta-analytic research suggests that perceived organizational support is highly related to job satisfaction ( $r=.62$ ), an outcome of work engagement (Rhoades &

Eisenberger, 2002). Furthermore, employees who perceive support may feel obligated to respond with increased effort due to the social norm of reciprocity (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). For instance, if an employee feels that his/her organization is concerned about his/her well-being, perhaps by assisting the employee with getting a shift covered, the employee may then feel obligated to put forth increased effort at work to reciprocate. This suggests a positive relationship between organizational support and engagement.

The present study will analyze work engagement in full-time students at Grand Valley State University who have part-time entry-level jobs. Specifically, this study will examine whether work/school congruency, generalized self-efficacy, conscientiousness, and perceived organizational support are predictive of work engagement.

### **Hypotheses**

The present study investigated whether there were any significant predictors of job engagement. Specifically, it was hypothesized that conscientiousness, perceived social support at work, work-school congruency, and generalized self-efficacy would be positively associated with job engagement and significantly contribute to its variation.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Seventy-four undergraduate students participated in this study. All participants signed up for the study using Sona-System, a program used for posting and signing up for research sessions. All participants earned credit toward their introductory psychology class. Only full-time students at the time of data collection enrolled in at least twelve credits winter semester 2014 who held part-time jobs were eligible to participate. Of the 74 participants, 45 were female and 29 were male, with ages ranging from 18 to 31 ( $M=19.3$ ).

## Materials

The questionnaire included measures of job engagement, congruency, perceived social support at work, generalized self-efficacy, conscientiousness and other additional variables. Each of these instruments had statements with which participants marked their level of agreement with a 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), or 5 (strongly agree). The final score on each of these measures was calculated as an average of each item. Some other variables in the questionnaire were major, overall GPA, number of credit hours that semester, place of work, job title, and average number of work hours per week. Standard demographics including race/ethnicity, gender, and age were also obtained at the beginning of the questionnaire.

**Job Engagement Scale.** The Job Engagement Scale (JES) contained 18 statements; for example, “I work with intensity on my job task,” “I exert a lot of energy on my job task,” and “I feel positive about my job.” This measure was developed and validated in a dissertation by Bruce Louis Rich (2007). It is a measure that better captures work engagement than other engagement scales. Rich’s JES was developed specifically to capture job engagement and its dimensions: physical, emotional, and cognitive. Thus, it was chosen for use in this study. This instrument had a Cronbach’s alpha of .935.

**Congruency.** The congruency instrument assessed student feelings of congruency between work and school. It contained five statements including “The information or knowledge I need for work is not the same as what I need to know for school,” “Some of the same skills/behaviors help me both at school and on my job,” “What I do at work is not really relevant to my college studies,” “The kinds of things I do at school are similar to what I have to do at work” and “My job and school are similar in a number of ways.” This measure was created by



Ellen Shupe to capture work to school and school to work facilitation (2013). For this instrument, Cronbach's alpha was .805.

**Perceived Organizational Support.** The perceived organizational support measure assessed students' feelings of social support at work and contained seven statements. For the purpose of this study, "my organization" was changed to "my place of work," for example, "My place of work really cares about my well-being," "My place of work shows little concern for me," and "My place of work helps me getting shifts covered if I need them." This measure was acquired from the dissertation by Bruce Louis Rich (2007). For this instrument, Cronbach's alpha was .797.

**Generalized Self-Efficacy.** The generalized self-efficacy measure contained 12 items that aimed to assess feelings of self-efficacy, taking into account self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability. For example, "I am confident I get the success I deserve in life," "Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless," and "I do not feel in control of my success in my goals." This measure was acquired from the dissertation by Bruce Louis Rich (2007). For this instrument, Cronbach's alpha was .817.

**Conscientiousness.** This measure assessed the dimension of conscientiousness in the five-factor model of personality. It contained 12 items, some of which were "I am not a very methodical person," "I keep my belongings clean and neat," and "When I make a commitment, I can always be counted on to follow through." This measure was acquired from the dissertation by Bruce Louis Rich (2007) but originally created and validated by Costa and McCrae (1992). For this instrument, Cronbach's alpha was .781.

## Procedure

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants read and signed consent forms, completed the questionnaire containing all measures, and were debriefed. After completion of the study, all participants earned credit toward their introductory psychology course.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The average score for the dependent variable, job engagement, was 3.94 with a standard deviation of .63. The average score for congruency was 2.62 with a standard deviation of .84. The average score for organizational support was 3.81 with a standard deviation of .63. The average score for generalized self-efficacy was 3.68 with a standard deviation of .48. The average score for conscientiousness was 3.87 with a standard deviation of .467.

### Multiple Hierarchical Regression

SPSS was used for all analyses. Correlations were calculated to examine associations between the predictors and job engagement. The two-tailed correlation analyses in Table 1 indicate conscientiousness, generalized self-efficacy, support, and congruency are significantly and positively correlated with job engagement. Predictive ability was analyzed next.

Table 1

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Pearson correlation coefficient with Job Engagement</b>	<b>Two-tailed p-values</b>
Conscientiousness	.245*	.035
Generalized Self-Efficacy	.280*	.016
Perceived Organizational Support	.435**	<.001
Congruency	.405**	<.001

Multiple Hierarchical Regression analyses were conducted to uncover significant predictors of job engagement. All control variables including GPA, gender, average hours worked each week, and credit hours were entered into the regression first. In the second step, scores of the hypothesized predictors were entered: congruency, conscientiousness, perceived organizational support, and generalized self-efficacy. As shown in Table 2, variables entered in the first step were non-significant in their ability to predict job engagement ( $F=.271, p=.896$ ). The hypothesized predictors entered in the second step significantly predicted job engagement ( $F=4.144, p=.001$ ).

Table 2

Step		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.467	4	.117	.271	.896
	Residual	27.545	64	.430		
	Total	28.012	68			
2	Regression	9.969	8	1.246	4.144*	.001
	Residual	18.043	60	.301		
	Total	28.012	68			

The hypothesized predictors can be evaluated in Table 3. Of these constructs, only congruency and work support were significant; together, they uniquely and significantly explained 35.6% of the variation in job engagement ( $r\text{-square}=.356$ ). Perceived organizational support explained significant variation in job engagement ( $\beta=.367, p=.003$ ). Congruency also helped to explain unique variation in job engagement ( $\beta=.265, p=.020$ ). Conscientiousness and generalized self-efficacy were not found to be significant predictors of job engagement.

Table 3

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Standardized Coefficient Beta</b>	<b>t test statistic</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Congruency	.265	2.385*	.020
Perceived Organizational Support	.367	3.077**	.003
Generalized Self-Efficacy	.124	.921	.361
Conscientiousness	.114	.913	.365

### **Discussion**

It was hypothesized that conscientiousness, congruency, perceived organizational support, and generalized self-efficacy would be positively related to and significantly predict job engagement. While results show that each of these variables had a significant positive correlation with job engagement, only congruency and perceived organizational support significantly predicted it.

Previous research suggests that engagement is predictive of performance and related to psychological well-being (Antonison, 2011; Rich, 2007). A study conducted in 2013 can then link this well-being to additional benefits. Specifically, the study's results suggest that student well-being is significantly related to student persistence to graduate (Shishim, 2013). Another study conducted by Ruthig, Haynes, Perry and Chipperfield shows similar results: a positive relationship exists between student well-being and academic performance (2007). The results of these studies suggest that well-being, an outcome related to work engagement, is correlated with student academic success. Extrapolating from these results, engagement at work may have inherent academic benefits via the increased well-being of students. More specifically, increased work engagement is related to psychological well-being which has been shown to be related to

academic performance in students. Therefore, work engagement in students may lead to increased academic performance through improved well-being.

In this study it was found that congruency and work support uniquely and significantly predicted job engagement. This important finding has implications for how employers may seek to increase engagement of employees, particularly when these employees are full-time students. They may find it beneficial to focus on supporting their workers via scheduling assistance or even helping them to feel valued. Additionally, students may find it beneficial to choose a job in which they perceive work/school congruency.

This study is novel in its discovery that perceived organizational support at work and work/school congruency are significantly predictive of work engagement in full-time undergraduate students who are part-time workers. These results indicate that both students and employers ought to pay attention to these constructs, perceived social support and congruency, and how they affect engagement and consequently performance and well-being outcomes.

Although the results of this study are both interesting and important, they are not without limitations. The results found in this study are not generalizable past full-time undergraduate students at Grand Valley State University who have part-time jobs. Additionally, the results cannot be connected to part-time students or students with full-time jobs.

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