

When Your Student is Overwhelmed

Many students are guilty of it at one point or another: holding “I had less sleep than you did” or “I’m SO busy!” contests. This tends to be a particular phenomenon among student leaders, who are often some of the busiest students on campus. They swap tales of all-nighters, crammed schedules and three-page To Do lists, almost as a badge of honor, to prove that they are in demand and working hard.

If you suspect that your student is swamped and feeling overwhelmed, there are a few things you can do:

- Ask them to list out their activities and responsibilities for the semester. What time commitment is required for each per week?
- Then, ask them about things they *want* to accomplish this semester, whether it’s doing really well in a particular class, taking a Pilates class or spending

Signs That Your Student May be Overwhelmed

She is...

- Constantly feeling behind
- Worried about how others perceive her
- Feeling like she’s letting people down
- Not able to get a handle on her various commitments
- Paralyzed by multi-tasking
- Consistently disorganized
- Not as reliable as she used to be
- Frustrated with herself
- Burned out
- Tense to the point of anger and other intense emotions (crying, swearing, etc.)
- Scattered and unfocused

If you’re concerned that your student isn’t handling things well, help her break down the commitments in her life into more manageable chunks. Also, suggest that she talk things out with someone in the learning center or counseling center to help her get back on track. Being overwhelmed can be frightening and frustrating—she needs your encouragement and support.

good time with friends who will be graduating in May.

- Looking at their list of commitments, ask them where they are going to fit in their “wants.”
- Also, remind them of responsibilities that they may not have considered, such as getting their resume up to par for a summer/fall internship, researching grad schools or volunteering at the local social service agency as part of their class-work.
- Once the time commitments seem to be laid out, talk with your student about living with a crammed-full schedule. Is this how they want to operate? What happens if a friend needs them for moral support due to a death in the family? Will they only be able to be half there because their commitments are so rigid? Or what if the opportunity to go away on a retreat presents itself? Will the backlog of things on their “To Do” list prevent them from grabbing the chance? Feel free to use examples from your own life or those you’ve observed to talk about missed opportunities due to too-full schedules.
- You may also want to talk about how some student leaders feel valued proportional to how busy and needed they are. Does your student identify with his work and accomplishments more than he identifies with just being himself? You may only touch the tip of the iceberg with this topic, as delving into it deeper could benefit from the assistance of a trained counselor.
- Then, talk about what could be cut from your student’s schedule. Don’t make suggestions; let him do that. What activity is on the list that doesn’t feel totally worthwhile? Could he be a member of an organization instead of an officer? What are some ways to whittle the schedule into something that is manageable while still being satisfying?

These kinds of conversations can help students take their personal health and well-being into consideration a bit more. You can help your student see that you’re not judging her by the quantity of her involvements but by the quality of her commitment. Have some intentional conversations to let her know that it’s NOT a contest to see who can be the busiest and get the least sleep. A balanced life is much more worthwhile.

