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# MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

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### WRITING AND STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT

We asked the 365 undergraduates to describe the courses they were currently taking. Three questions in particular yielded revealing answers. First: In relation to your other courses, what is your level of *total time commitment* to this course? Second: What level of *intellectual challenge* does this course pose to you? Third: What is your level of *personal engagement* in this course?

Interviewers also asked how much writing was required for each course. True, five pages in a history course is not exactly equivalent to five pages in a biology course. But aggregating over dozens of classes gives a general picture of how students deal with different writing demands.

The results are stunning. The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students' level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students' level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students' engagement and any other course characteristic. It is stronger than the relation between students' engagement and their impressions of their professor. It is far stronger than the relationship between level of engagement and *why* a student takes a course (re-

quired versus elective, major field versus not in the major field). The simple correlation between the amount of writing required in a course and students' overall commitment to it tells a lot about the importance of writing.

Consider a few key findings. First, courses with more than twenty pages of final-draft writing per semester draw nearly twice as much time as courses with no formal writing assignments (an average of eleven hours work per week versus six hours). The more writing required, the more time students commit.

Second, students relate the intellectual challenge of a course to the amount of writing it requires. More writing is highly correlated with more intellectual challenge.

Third, the impact of writing assignments on students' self-reported level of engagement is dramatic. Certainly most faculty members want students to engage with their courses: they may want to keep this finding in mind.