

# How to Stay Sane with a Crazy Busy Schedule

By [Amanda J. Carroll](#) | February 05, 2018



College is incredibly time-consuming, especially for students in STEM fields. Between lectures, labs, homework, lab reports, tutorials, research, plus the amount of time you have to devote to understanding material, studying chemistry is no joke. Compound all the demands of your course load with a full- or part-time job, family needs, and extracurricular activities (to round out your résumé), and the pressure can feel downright intense.

Colleges generally recommend dedicating at least three hours to your studies outside of class for every hour you spend in class. To a student who has to work between, before, and after school, it may seem that there is never enough time to accomplish everything—and do well.

But it is possible to create a successful balance between your coursework and your job if you have solid strategies and a positive outlook.

## Flex your schedule

Whether you're working full-time or part-time, you would be surprised to know how many employers allow for flexible schedules. Many students are able to schedule for either *weekdays only* or *weekends only*. If you're on a full-time schedule and have classes that meet during the day, you can negotiate working around your classes and still get your hours in.

Talk to talk to your boss or the human resources department. Often, they are willing to work with you to accommodate an unconventional schedule.

Another idea to consider is scheduling longer hours on certain days so that you can devote more time to studying on days that you're off.

When you have to work, use every opportunity to get some studying in—during a lunch break, on a commuter bus or train, or standing in line at the bank. Your time is valuable, and every second counts.

As long as you carve out enough time to complete school tasks, you should be in good shape to stay on top of your schoolwork.

## **Reboot yourself**

Everyone feels overwhelmed by heavy workloads that require a lot of time and energy to complete. That's why once those midterms are over and you've gotten through a particularly tough segment of the semester, it's totally normal to want to unwind, relax, hang out with friends, and enjoy some downtime.

You need these breaks. You are human. Humans are social beings and need time to maintain their social connections. And your brain needs a break to recharge.

For your sanity, by all means, take time to recharge; just do it responsibly. It's one thing to catch an episode or two of your favorite Netflix original. But binging on an entire season robs you of the time you need to prepare for the work that will be due soon.

It's important to know yourself when making decisions about how to spend free time. If you can't read a book without finishing the entire story, maybe flip through a magazine (like *inChemistry*) instead. If you can't watch one or two episodes of a show without finishing the season, consider watching a movie.

Even during those intense study periods, you will need rest. Almost no one can study eight hours straight, but including short (5-10 minute) "me breaks" (meditate, exercise, or make a phone call) is a much more effective and less stressful approach.

## **Plan the action**

One of the best strategies for balancing work and school is to plan effectively. With so many things on your plate, it is easy to forget about an assignment, an upcoming quiz, or an exam. Get a planner (or a planning app) and write everything down as you find out about assignments.

The key to successful planning is consistency. Be rigorous about recording your assignments and study times until it becomes a habit. Some students even write down their classes for each day so they don't forget to go to them. You can use colored highlighters to keep different classes or types of assignments such as homework, lab reports, quizzes, or exams organized. Whatever methods you choose, be sure to include study time in your schedule.

If you write everything in your planner and consult it on a regular basis, you'll have a better idea of how to divide your work over the upcoming days or weeks and prioritize efficiently. This also makes you less likely to forget about something until the last minute or, worse, forget about it completely.

The semester has a rhythm to it, and though at times it can seem as if your professors are plotting against you, if you know you have three exams, a lab report due, and a 20-hour workweek coming up, you can stay on top of it all by getting ready early (as opposed to trying to live off of coffee and energy drinks for a week).

Staying organized and informed helps you prepare and prioritize how to allocate your time, and makes you less likely to pick up an extra shift only to realize you have a homework assignment due the day after you've worked all night.

## **Sneak in extra study time**

Another key to success is using your time wisely. It is surprisingly easy to lose valuable time and not realize it. If you have an hour between classes, leave those social media apps alone! You'll end up in a rabbit hole. Instead, pull out your notes and look over the material for your upcoming quiz. If one of your classes gets canceled, skip that trip to an off-campus coffeehouse and use the time for homework instead. If you have downtime in lab (everyone has spent an hour distilling something for an experiment), use that time to go over flash cards, quiz friends about exam material, or work on calculations for the end of the lab (but don't forget about your water!).

Some employers don't mind if you study during a slow period, as long as you're able to get back to work quickly when you're needed. Some jobs may not allow this, but it never hurts to ask, especially since many employers realize the time struggles that working college students face. A few minutes here and there may not feel like much, but this is actually valuable study time that you can use to your advantage if you seize these opportunities.

## **Manage your expectations**

Balancing work and school can be very frustrating and discouraging. "Some people don't understand what it's like to have that 20-plus-hour workweek throughout the duration of the semester where you may work most nights/days when assignments are due or when exams are scheduled," says Lana Nitti, a student at Utica College in New York.

"Unfortunately, I haven't fully mastered it myself, and it always seems like something is getting neglected or I'm not performing at my very best."

For people like Lana, who has found it hard to overcome some of these challenges, it's important to use all the tools available to be as successful as possible... and then let go. When everything is happening at the same time, it can feel like you aren't doing anything well enough. The fact is, you are likely doing far better than you give yourself credit for.

When you are juggling school, work, friends, family, and relationships, it is important to stave off self-criticism and celebrate what you have accomplished, rather than dwelling on what you didn't.

And avoid comparing yourself to others. Whether you are talking face-to-face or following someone on social media, you only get a partial glimpse into their lives, so comparisons are meaningless. Know that you are doing the best you can on your own path. Remember that you are, in fact, giving your best; it just looks different from everyone else's best.

## Last note

There is no magic way to create more hours in the day, so use the ones you have wisely. Do what makes the most sense for you and that doesn't compromise your performance.

Everyone struggles with feelings of inadequacy, but by taking care of yourself physically and mentally, and planning smart for every assignment and exam, you can relieve some of the pressure and keep ahead of the game.

### COLLEGE LIFE

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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