

Procrastination

*Dolores Robles, MA, Mt. San Antonio College
Department of Family & Consumer Sciences*

As this spring semester of 2009 came to an end, I found myself having the same old end of the semester conversation with my office mates regarding the number of students asking for (sometimes demanding) the opportunity to turn in late work on the last day of class. We were all baffled by the fact that throughout the semester we had listed due dates for term projects via several methods: our syllabi, Blackboard, e-mail reminders, and of course verbally, by mentioning due dates during in-class announcements. Our common realization was, "despite these multiple reminders, how can some students not turn in assignments on time? The answer of course, is obvious - procrastination.

Procrastination is quite common and to some degree is common behavior among most people (Harriot and Ferrari, 1996). According to Jarmon (2008) many procrastinators may only procrastinate in certain areas of their life while some may procrastinate in every area of their life. Some procrastinators are more efficient at procrastinating than others. Despite the negative connotation associated with procrastination, some researchers have found that not all procrastinating behavior is harmful. For example, Chu and Choi (2005) differentiated between passive procrastinators and active procrastinators. Passive procrastinators are the "classic" procrastinator that tends to avoid completing a task. Active procrastinators on the other hand, intentionally procrastinate. It seems that "active" procrastinators are those individuals that work best under pressure. Active procrastinators are able to hyper focus and exert all of their energy into completing the task at hand. According to Chu and Choi what differentiates active procrastinators from passive procrastinators are feelings and thoughts. When faced with time constraints, active procrastinators feel motivated and are confident in their ability to handle the task, whereas passive procrastinators often endure negative feelings and thoughts about their ability to successfully complete a task.

Procrastination is often defined in the literature as a negative tendency to postpone the completion of a task, work, or decision (Goldsmith 2005; Prohaska, Morrill, Atilas, & Perez, 2000; Throop & Castellucci, 2003; & Lay, 1986) that often results in negative consequences for the individual or for the group that they are working with. The negative consequence for students are lower grades and sub par performance on exams, term papers and projects (as cited in Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, & Hooper, 2003). Jackson et al. reported an association among lower levels of procrastination and less time spent on social and recreational activities with higher grade point average. Throop and Castellucci (2004) and Goldsmith (2005) attribute procrastination to fear of responsibility or disinterest. I have heard many student conversations about social activities and events that seemingly impeded their inability to fully complete a project accurately or on time. One colleague was approached by a student begging to turn in a term project late. His excuse -- he turned 21 and was busy celebrating with his friends. Were there a "best excuse by a student" contest, we could have a finalist.

A study conducted by Quest Media (Harris, 2003) revealed that 95% of college students said they procrastinated "frequently" and "very frequently". Additionally, students

revealed that instead of writing papers they preferred to watch TV (23%), surf the net (17%) and sleep (13%). There is no doubt in my mind that a new study would reveal that students would prefer to text or download music in addition to those listed above. In-class discussions on this topic often bring about smirks, smiles, and laughter by students. I take it as their way of validating the findings of the study. A 2005 (Hoover) article on procrastination and college students published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* stated that 70% of college students actively procrastinate on starting or finishing their assignments. Interestingly, the article also noted that 70% of excuses presented to instructors by academic procrastinators were lies; mostly prevalent in lecture classes taught by women who students thought were “lenient”.

As educators, it is important for us to understand the reasons for procrastination among our students. Some procrastinate due to lack of time management skills, motivation, or priority setting (Jackson et al. 2003). While others may procrastinate due to feelings of inadequacy, low self esteem and stress (as cited in Chu and Choi, 2005). One study of academic procrastination by nontraditional students and among 4 year and community college students revealed no difference between the two (Prohaska, Morrill, Atilas, and Perez, 2000). The study was consistent with other studies (Ferrari, 1991) on procrastination among 4 year and community college students. However, it is important to mention that the study did find more procrastination on weekly reading assignments by nontraditional students likely attributed to “overloaded schedules associated with work and family responsibilities”.

Those of us who teach Life Management have entire lectures devoted to time management, setting priorities and goals. Practicing time management helps one procrastinate less. The following strategies outlined by Jarmon (2008) may be integrated into some of our lectures to help our students curb procrastination:

- 1) Break large tasks into smaller tasks: breaking down a project into small steps is very helpful: For example, a 50 page reading assignment becomes a series of reading in 5, 6 or 7 page increments.
- 2) List tasks for a project: cross off each task that has been completed. There is something magical and motivating about crossing off a completed task.
- 3) Reward yourself for completed tasks: the reward should be something that is motivating such as dinner with a friend, watching a movie, or something fun.

Another way of curbing procrastination in our classrooms is by reevaluating our assignments. If students perceive an assignment to be boring, more than likely they will not attempt to complete it. We may think that we have created the most compelling assignment ever, but students may have a different opinion. It is equally important for us as instructors to solicit feedback on our assignments from our students. I encourage students to provide anonymous feedback on assignments, and depending on the class, I may ask the students what they thought and engage them in a discussion on what they liked, didn't like, and what should be changed. Even I have to admit that sometimes it takes me a while to actually make the changes to some of my assignments.

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