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Survey links all-nighters to students' lower GPAs

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ALBANY, N.Y. — Students who rely on all-nighters to bring up their grades might want to sleep on that strategy: A new survey says those who never study all night have slightly higher grade-point averages than those who do.

A survey of 120 students at St. Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college in northern New York, found that students who have never pulled an all-nighter have average GPAs of 3.2, compared with 2.95 for those who have. The study, by assistant professor of psychology Pamela Thacher, is to be included in the January issue of Behavioral Sleep Medicine.

"It's not a big difference, but it's pretty striking," Thacher said. "I am primarily a sleep researcher, and I know nobody thinks clearly at 4 in the morning. You think you do, but you can't."

A second study by Thacher, a clinical psychologist, had "extremely similar" results showing lower grades among the sleep skippers.

Many students, of course, have inadequate or irregular sleep, for reasons ranging from excessive caffeine to poor time management.

Prav Chatani, a St. Lawrence sophomore who wasn't involved in either study, said the findings made sense. The neuroscience major has been pulling fewer all-nighters but recently stayed up all night to prepare for an organic chemistry test and a neuroscience presentation, he said. He had difficulty remembering some of the material he studied at around 4 or 5 in the morning.

Dr. Howard Weiss, a physician at St. Peter's Sleep Center in Albany, said the study results make sense.

"Certainly that data is out there showing that short sleep duration absolutely interferes with concentration, interferes with performance on objective testing," he said.

Some night owls do get good grades, of course, which may be explained by circadian rhythms, Weiss said. Circadian rhythms can be tracked through body temperature and hormonal transmissions.

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