

Article for *CCHA Humanist*
on “Take Back Your Time Day”
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Consider some realities about work and life in America (based on recent Harris polls):

- *We work more hours than people in any other industrialized nation:
 - 150 hours per year longer than the Japanese
 - 260 hours more than the British
 - 500 hours more than Germans
- *Vacations in America are not mandated by law; in other industrialized nations they receive:
 - 15 days in China
 - 25 days in France
 - 20 days in Italy
 - 25 days in Spain
 - 20 days in the U.K.
 - 13% of American companies provide no vacation time, up from 5% a year ago
- *Americans experience an increasing amount of stress:
 - two-thirds say they are often stressed
 - seven out of ten say they need more fun in their lives
 - nearly half believe that time is more important than money
 - a third would trade a day's pay for a day off
 - if given the chance to live their lives over, 40% say they would spend more time enjoying leisure activities
- *Our time-deficits have significant and far-reaching effects:
 - many health-related maladies
 - depression
 - higher divorce rates
 - family dysfunction
 - lower productivity
 - lower job and life satisfaction
- *Because we are time-starved and stressed, we have difficulty having healthy leisure activities:
 - Americans spend as much time each day with the television (and with computer games) as we do with our families.
 - Ironically, Americans perceive that the average American has less than half the leisure hours each week than the reality (we enjoy 33.2 leisure hours per week, but we think that the average American has only 14.8).
 - Only slightly more than half of us take all the vacation days we are entitled to (employer granted) each year.

These are just a few of the statistics that indicate that something is deeply wrong with our work/leisure picture. Americans are working more hours (the average American worker works 199 hours more today than s/he did in 1973!), we are much more efficient (in many sectors our efficiency has doubled in two decades), our national wealth has

skyrocketed, and yet we have less time and ability to enjoy what we have. Our version of consumerism runs on this skewed situation, of course: given these realities, average American workers compensate for their “lives out of control” by consuming more.

America’s “time famine” cuts across all boundaries: rich and poor, male and female, young and old, Democrats and Republicans, whites and non-whites alike suffer from our inability to slow down and enjoy the fruits of our labors. In response, people from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives are joining together to “take back our time.” Labor activists, environmentalists, advocates of simple living, religious leaders, parents, counselors and others concerned about families, academics from many backgrounds, and political activists met in early June at Loyola University in Chicago at the first annual “Take Back Your Time Day” conference. We met to learn from each other what we can do in our own lives and communities to ease our time stress and all that accompanies it.

Because we believe there are so many serious issues brought together under this broad umbrella, we also hoped to launch a national movement similar to the environmental or feminist movements. For besides the most pressing of our social, political, environmental, and personal issues of our time, it’s not surprising to find here some of the deepest philosophical and religious issues of our day: the nature of the good life, our relationships with nature, our need for substantial personal and social time to grow and sustain healthy humans and communities, social and economic justice, how to raise children, the nature of time, and so on.

Happily, those gathered (including several of us from community colleges) had many positive strategies and recommendations to try to deal with this large set of problems. Many of these ideas are collected in the “handbook” for this movement, *Take Back Your Time* (edited by John de Graaf, published by Berrett-Koehler), and you can also connect to this movement through the web site www.timeday.org.

This year’s “Time Day” is October 24. This date marks the day the average American worker would be finished working for the year if they worked as many hours as their European counterparts. Last year over 200 locales had some kind of event publicizing the day and trying to help others comprehend the significance of our time famines. This year we expect many more events as the movement grows.

I believe community college humanities courses are a perfect venue for discussing our relationships to time, and to work and leisure. Last year at Kirkwood we hosted several speakers, including Al Gini, author of *My Job, My Self* and *The Importance of Being Lazy*. This year I plan to have students in my Working in America sections (an interdisciplinary humanities class that focuses on work) plan a variety of events on our campus. The centerpiece of our week (Oct. 24-29) will be a campus visit by Juliet Schor, an economist/sociologist who has written several important books on this topic (including *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*). Schor will be discussing her most recent book (*Born to Buy*, due out in September) which is concerned with the effects of consumerism on the development and lives of children.

I know of few topics that are so central to the humanities and our students' lives as our time famine and the myriad issues that grow from and cause it. Thus I encourage all humanities teachers to take a look at this "movement" and its rapidly growing body of literature (and film and poetry and history and philosophy...). I would be happy to respond to any inquiries; please contact me at 319-887-3615 or bob.sessions@kirkwood.edu).