

Maybe we should just do less

By [Anne Mocko](#)

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Last year as part of a faculty group book-read I encountered Larry Rasmussen's [Earth Honoring Faith](#). In Rasmussen's view, sabbath is one of the resources that could be deployed to apply brakes to a society that is over-consuming the resources of the planet and the lives of its own members. The suggestion of the healing possibilities of sabbath resonated with me not only because of my environmental commitments, but also on a more human level. I rush through my life, and in the past two years my health has suffered badly. Semester after semester, my students come to me frantic and overcommitted, bouncing between classwork, athletics, and dozens of activities, routinely diagnosed with anxiety disorders and not infrequently dissolving into tears in my office.

Liberal arts colleges have caught a lot of flak in the national media in recent years for insufficiently preparing our students for post-college life. However, in permitting a campus culture that rewards over-commitment, we are actually preparing our students extraordinarily well to enter American society. Americans [work too much](#) and as a result, we're [sick, unhappy, and stuck in patterns of consumption](#) that are terrible for our quality of life. We humble-brag about how busy we are. We rarely feel rested or whole. We drive because we don't have time to walk or bike, and we get carryout in Styrofoam containers because we don't have time to cook.

On our campus, as the faculty talk with the administration about making the college distinctive and appealing, the discussion is always about how we can do more: more programs, more activities, more opportunities.

But what if the answer is to start doing *less*?

College campuses have tremendous potential to reset social patterns. We gather young people right at the time when they're ready to question the conditions of their lives and experiment with new ways of being, and then we send them out into the wider world to join institutions, start families, and shift the world.

Through a campus sabbath we could model a countercultural vision of the good life. The program could be piloted once monthly, but could grow to a once-weekly practice. On sabbath Sunday, students would be asked to lay aside the activities that normally consume them (school work, athletic practices, ensembles) from sunup to sundown—a time period that would encourage them to become more attuned to the natural rhythms of the planet. They would be asked to turn off the lights and set aside all electronics. The library would not open, and dining services would be asked to serve a simple meal that could be prepared in advance and served with a minimal staff. Students would be asked to not drive or to carpool.

In its design, then, sabbath Sunday would be a day to rest and heal, to take a walk or have big conversations. It would be a day to take stock and gain perspective, a day to pay attention to the conditions of our lives, and a day to reduce our carbon footprint. sabbath would encourage students to cultivate simplicity and limits in a way that could create a richer, more intentional community life in the process.

Every time I have spoken to someone about this idea, she or he has thought it was exactly what everyone in our community needs. And yet every single person has also thought that we could not do it. The reasons have been different ('students would never give up their phones,' 'you couldn't convince athletics/music to have one fewer practice,' 'you could never do the whole day, so maybe just an hour once a month would work better'), but I think the real reason is that no one feels empowered to challenge or change the culture of busyness. No one feels like we could actually just *do less*.

But our busyness—our wild burning through all our personal and planetary resources—is a collective habit that we ourselves create and sustain. Our lives are arranged this way because of choices we make as individuals, families, and particularly as institutions, and so we are precisely the people who could change that. Perhaps our campus is in a position to train a whole generation of young adults to live their lives more richly and deeply by teaching them to take the time to do less.