

Trends in Non-Assigned Reading by High School Seniors

By Margaret K. Libsch and Martha Breslow

High school seniors of the 1990s face many complex challenges; their success in meeting these challenges will be determined by their academic preparation and skills, including their level of reading achievement. There have been, however, well-publicized declines in national Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores over the past several years, for both math and verbal or reading skills (Koretz, 1992). To a certain extent, reading achievement is a function of the amount of time and energy students invest in reading activities outside school as well as during class time (Gaddy, 1986).

The results of a national study provide some insight into seniors' reading behavior outside school. Researchers at the University of Michigan have been conducting annual surveys of nationwide samples of high school seniors since 1975. Among other topics in the survey, seniors are asked a series of questions about their leisure time activities, including the number of non-assigned books they have read. Student responses over time reveal an overall decrease in the reading of

books. In this article we review the responses of all seniors and then examine differences by gender and college plans.

The data are drawn from the study, *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth*, which has been going on since 1975. Each spring about 17,000 seniors participate in a 45-minute self-administered, in-school, paper-and-pencil survey supervised by trained field staff from the University of Michigan. The sample is nationally representative and includes students from approximately 140 public and private high schools. Study procedures are described in detail elsewhere (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley, 1991). Seniors are asked to respond to a wide variety of questions about personal and social issues, their expectations for the future, their educational and occupational plans and experiences, and their use of leisure time. The wording and response categories for the question about non-assigned books are shown in Table 1. For reporting purposes, the five original response categories have been collapsed into three: six or more books, one to five books, or no books.

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The item discussed here appears in only one of the six¹ questionnaire forms. Therefore, the number of seniors who responded to the item in any given year is relatively small—fewer than 3,500. For all cross-time comparisons, three years of data were averaged together in order to construct stable estimates. Table 2 compares the responses for 1976–78 and 1992–94.

As Table 2 indicates, about half of all seniors reported reading from one to five non-assigned books per year, both in 1976–78 and in 1992–94. The proportion of seniors who reported reading six or more books, however, *decreased* from 37 percent in 1976–78 to 25 percent in 1992–94, a decline of 32 percent. The

percentage who read no books increased from 14 percent to 22 percent, an increase of 57 percent. These percentages signal a significant downward trend in the reading of books.

Gender Differences

Table 3 compares seniors' 1976–78 and 1992–94 averaged responses according to gender.

As Table 3 indicates, male and female students report very different reading patterns. In 1992–94, almost 30 percent of females read six or more non-assigned books, compared to 20 percent of males. Females were also slightly more likely than males to read one to five books. Males, on the other hand, were more likely to

1. There were five forms from 1976 to 1988, and six from 1989 to the present.

TABLE 1

Reading Item from Monitoring the Future Survey

In the past year, how many books have you read just because you wanted to—that is, without their being assigned?

Response categories:

1. None; 2. One; 3. Two to five; 4. Six to ten; 5. Ten or more

TABLE 2

Cross-Time Comparison of Number of Books Read by Seniors

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES

Number of Books Read	1976–78 (<i>n</i> = 9,862)	1992–94 (<i>n</i> = 8,086)
Six or more	37	25
One to five	49	52
No books	14	22
	100	99

read no books at all, 29 percent versus 17 percent for females.

This gender gap has existed since the study began. Indeed, it was larger in the 1970s than in the 1990s. Non-assigned reading has declined considerably for both males and females, but the decline is sharper for females—perhaps because reading was already at a low level for males. In 1992–94, 36 percent fewer females read six or more books than in 1976–78 (29 percent versus 45 percent), as compared to a 29 percent decrease for males who read six or more books (20 percent versus 28 percent). It is disturbing to note that over time there have been very large increases for both females and males in the number of respondents who reported reading no books. For females, the percentage doubled between the 1970s and 1990s (from 8 percent to 17 percent); for males, the percentage increased by about half (from 19 percent to 29 percent).

Response Differences According to College Plans

In a separate item, which appears on all six forms, the Monitoring the Future study also asks students whether or not they plan to graduate from a four-year college. Therefore, it is possible to compare the responses of seniors with four-year college plans to the responses of those without such plans. Since 1976, there has been a 50 percent increase in the percentage of students who reported they plan to attend a four-year college (from 50 to 75 percent). Given that increase, one would have expected to see an overall increase in the number of books read, rather than a decrease, because reading seems logically related to academic and test performance. Table 4 compares seniors' responses according to college plans for 1976–78 and 1992–94.

As Table 4 indicates, and as may be expected, college-bound seniors

TABLE 3

Number of Books Read by Seniors: According to Gender

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES

Number of Books Read	1976–1978		1992–1994	
	Males (<i>n</i> = 4,543)	Females (<i>n</i> = 4,953)	Males (<i>n</i> = 3,703)	Females (<i>n</i> = 4,139)
Six or more	28	45	20	29
One to five	53	47	51	55
No books	19	8	29	17
	100	100	100	101

generally reported reading more non-assigned books than their non-college-bound peers, but the decline in reading behavior noted earlier also appears here. About 30 percent of the 1992–94 college-bound, and nearly 20 percent of the non-college-bound seniors, reported reading six or more books. Since 1976–78 there have been significant decreases for both groups—35 percent for the college-bound and 41 percent for the non-college-bound—in the numbers who have read six or more books.

Slightly more than half of the 1992–94 college-bound seniors, and nearly the same proportion of the non-college-bound, reported reading one to five non-assigned books with-

in the past year. It is worth noting that the proportion of college-bound seniors who reported reading no books has more than doubled over the span of the study (from 8 to 19 percent), while the percentage of non-college-bound students who reported reading no books has nearly doubled during that time (from 18 to 32 percent).

Other Types of Reading Material

The results of the ongoing Monitoring the Future study reveal an overall decline in the percentage of high school seniors who choose to read non-assigned books as a leisure time activity. A shift from

TABLE 4
Number of Books Read by Seniors: According to College Plans

Number of Books Read	PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES			
	1976–1978		1992–1994	
	College (<i>n</i> = 4,568)	Non-college (<i>n</i> = 4,493)	College (<i>n</i> = 5,648)	Non-college (<i>n</i> = 1,885)
Six or more	43	32	28	19
One to five	48	50	54	50
No books	8	18	19	32
	99	100	101	101

TABLE 5
Frequency of Reading Books, Magazines, or Newspapers

The next questions ask about the kinds of things you might do. How often do you do each of the following?... Read books, magazines, or newspapers.

Response categories:

- 5. Almost everyday; 4. At least once a week; 3. Once or twice a month; 2. A few times a year; 1. Never

books to other forms of reading matter or selection of other leisure activities by seniors could account for the observed decline. Therefore, we examined the issue of student reading behavior using a separate item found on one of the questionnaire forms. This item asks seniors how often they have read books, magazines, or newspapers in the past year. Response alternatives for the item are differentiated according to the frequency of reading activities, not according to the specific type of reading material selected. Table 5 contains the wording of the question and response alternatives.

Table 6 compares seniors' responses for 1976-78 and 1992-94.

As Table 6 illustrates, fewer than half the 1992-94 seniors reported reading books, magazines, or newspapers on a daily basis. This represents a significant (23 percent) decline from 1976-78 percentages. Thus, the selection of other types of reading material does not appear to

account for much of the decline in reading non-assigned books. About a third of the 1992-94 seniors reported some reading on a weekly basis, while a smaller proportion reported reading only once or twice a month. Very few seniors reported that they read only a few times a year or never engaged in any reading.

Television Viewing

The observed decrease in seniors' overall reading time suggests a corresponding increase in the proportion of time available for alternate leisure activities. At least some of high school students' leisure time that was once spent reading is currently spent upon more passive activities, including television viewing, according to Reynolds (1991). Therefore, we examined the issue of television viewing as a potential substitute for reading, using a separate item, found on one survey form, that asks seniors to estimate how much television they view on

TABLE 6

Cross-Time Comparison of Books, Magazines, or Newspapers Read by Seniors

Reading Activity	PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES	
	1976-78 (<i>n</i> = 9,982)	1992-94 (<i>n</i> = 8,072)
Almost everyday	60	46
At least once a week	25	32
Once or twice a month	10	14
A few times a year	3	5
Never	2	3
	100	100

an average weekday. Response alternatives are: five hours or more; about four hours; about three hours; about two hours; about one hour; half-hour or less; none. Cross-time comparisons of seniors' responses reveal a slight decline in the number of hours of television watched each day. Between the late 1970s and the 1990s, the percentage of seniors who watched four or more hours per day decreased by about 15 percent (from 26 to 22 percent). The proportion who watched two to three hours of television per day remained steady at about 39 percent. The percentage who reported watching an hour or less increased by 17 percent (from 30 to 35 percent). The proportion who did not usually watch television was essentially unchanged at 4.5 percent in the 1970s and 3.5 percent in the 1990s.

It seems, therefore, that television viewing is not responsible for displacing reading as a leisure time activity for high school seniors. Regardless of the activities that may be substituted for reading non-assigned books or magazines and newspapers, it appears today's seniors are at risk of failing to develop the reading skills that are the building blocks for future success in both the academic and work environments. ~**B**

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