

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# Work-life Balance in Academic Careers

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As professionals, we all strive for work-life balance, or perhaps more accurately, a sense of mutual fulfillment or overall contentment. Here, we conceptualize balance as an alignment between one's use of time and her personal and professional goals and priorities. Formal definitions of work-life balance vary but generally converge around the idea that this balance is not about equivalent distribution of time between professional and personal activities, but rather general satisfaction with one's life (Berry, 2010). Others have offered the notion of work-life integration, since balance seems too simplistic and fails to reflect increasingly blurry boundaries in the digital age (Ashkenas, 2012). Regardless of the term used, achieving this elusive state of contentment—as opposed to guilt, resentment, or regret—can be challenging because of its dynamic, highly personal nature. While academics may have more flexible schedules than other professions, this positive aspect of our positions can complicate efforts to achieve some semblance of balance because of the

seemingly fluid (or absent) boundaries between work and home, particularly when one adopts non-traditional schedules or telecommutes. Faculty commonly work long hours, including nights and weekends, and desire greater separation between their work and personal lives (Kinman & Jones, 2008).

Although research on this topic is limited, work-life balance issues appear to be especially salient for early career scholars, particularly those in tenure-track positions who feel pressured to “publish or perish” (Allen, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011). In school psychology, junior faculty also juggle teaching, supervision, service, and practice responsibilities. These pressures can be exacerbated when faculty struggle to find ways to rationalize and create time away from professional activities because of the concern that they should work all the time and always be doing more (Solomon, 2011). Not surprisingly, early career faculty are especially at risk of burnout. Given these constraints, many scholars will find it beneficial to engage in purposeful activities to foster well-being and satisfactory sense of balance in one's

professional and personal lives. Research suggests that the happiest faculty are those who have a sense of control over their work and schedules, and support within their institutions (Kinman & Jones, 2008). With this in mind, we describe potential strategies that may assist scholars at all career stages in improving work-life balance.

### **Engage in Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection is essential to self-care and one's sense of balance. Berry (2010) emphasized the importance of regularly assessing one's values and priorities to identify professional and personal goals and to guide decisions about responsibilities, activities, and time management. This may occur at annual, semesterly, monthly, or even weekly intervals. Schultheiss (2006) provided a series of questions one may periodically consider and discuss with mentors or peers when assessing one's conceptualization of their professional roles. She recommended recording and reviewing one's responses to the following questions at regular intervals:

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- What does work mean to you?
- What roles does work play in your life?
- What supports and barriers are evident? What may be possible?
- What implicit messages might there be about gender, race/ethnicity and privilege within work and family relationships?
- Do you connect with coworkers and share common interests, values, and goals?
- Do you have a sense of alienation and isolation at work?

The goal is to identify what is needed to feel fulfilled generally. Informally, we have found that faculty report greater overall satisfaction when they are have a sense of fit between their goals their position, and when they find their research and teaching meaningful. The questions above can be used to identify needed changes in thoughts and behavior to foster greater professional satisfaction. Others also note the importance of avoiding absolutist or perfectionistic thinking about personal and professional roles and activities (Cavendar, 2010). Accepting that we do not have to excel or be perfect at everything all of the time can be very liberating. That is, adopting an orientation of continuous improvement rather than immediate perfection can relieve internally-driven pressure.

**Set Boundaries**

Some scholars have argued that balance is unattainable—indeed, a myth—citing research that most faculty think it unrealistic, while recognizing the importance of healthy boundaries in fostering professional satisfaction (Jones, 2011). Setting clear boundaries about one’s time and attention may alleviate the sense that one’s professional activities are all-encompassing since there always seems to be something on which we could be working. In our own experience, colleagues have reported or demonstrated a number of strategies for establishing boundaries such as checking emails only at designated intervals or times; developing an email communication policy; protecting specific personal/family times (e.g., family dinner, daughter’s volleyball games, yoga class) when scheduling meetings or classes; maintaining a “traditional” work schedule to ensure time with non-academic partners; scheduling non-negotiable writing time; maintaining rigid office hours; scheduling work time around child-care activities; delaying responses to requests for new projects or service activities at least 24 hours to allow careful deliberation (e.g., allowing oneself to say no); and working behind closed doors or from home to minimize potential interruptions and maximize on-task

time. Such boundaries are dynamic and may shift as professional and personal priorities change.

Communicating these boundaries to colleagues and students (e.g., developing an electronic communication policy for inclusion in syllabi) can also shape their expectations about how they use your time and reduce ongoing confrontations or intrusions. At the same time, it is important to remember that people do not need to know what you are doing at all times or why you are not available; often it is fine to simply say, “Sorry, I am not available then” (Jones, 2011). Having a sense of control over one’s schedule has been shown to be the strongest predictor of work-life balance (Berry, 2010).

**Work Smarter**

For faculty, especially early career faculty, time management—or the sense that there simply isn’t enough time to accomplish everything that must be done—may be one of the greatest hindrances to a sense of balance or satisfaction. Finding ways to work more efficiently and increase productivity and organization are critical to success. Faculty should assess ways they could be more productive by documenting and reviewing their work tasks, monitoring time on-task and progress toward goals, and eliminating time spent on tasks that

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do not align with goals (e.g., web surfing, spending hours a day on emails). Others suggest making daily or weekly lists of action items organized by type of work (e.g., reading, writing, class, emails, calls, errands), rather than on relying on to-do lists of general tasks (Cavendar, 2010). At the same time, creating—and reviewing regularly—lists of short and long-term goals can be important to keeping track of the bigger picture.

Some early career scholars have reporting tracking and charting time spent writing, words or pages written per day, and other key behaviors. A simple web search for “productivity tools” or “time management tools” yields numerous free applications that can be used to self-monitor (Note: Amanda likes the free app from rescuetime.com because it does all the monitoring for her, allows for categorization of specific applications and websites, permits goals settings, and automatically generates weekly reports on productivity). Such resources can be used to determine how you actually use your time and where potential inefficiencies lie so that you can begin to identify ways to be use time wisely. Faculty members should share resources on these topics and provide support to each other in an effort to improve work-life balance within the professional community.

### Prioritize Self-Care

It is important to make self-care a priority by designating time for sleep, exercise, hobbies, relaxation, and other activities essential to mental and physical well-being, such as seeking medical or mental health services (Berry, 2010). Making time for social activities with family or friends, and having someone with whom you can share your frustrations are essential. Some people may even benefit from scheduling self-care time as it were an official work task. If you identify specific activities as critical to your overall life satisfaction, commit to making time for them (Cavendar, 2010). Berry (2010) also noted importance of avoiding a cycle of constant *delayed gratification* in thinking “I’ll finally be happy when ...” or “I can finally slow down when ...,” particularly when using tenure and promotion as critical hurdles to healthy behaviors, happiness or personal growth (including family expansion). This type of thought pattern signifies that one is not living in the present, and is not completely focused on their current joys and needs.

### Make Use of and Advocate for Institutional Supports

Faculty members may also seek work-life balance support at the institutional level. Mentorship programs are one

way that faculty members can receive guidance in this area. Both formal university mentorship programs as well as informal mentorship experiences within the college are beneficial when trying to understand professional expectations, set priorities, and implement strategies to foster productivity and satisfaction (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). Some people may find it helpful to identify a mentor or role model who can give advice on career development, time management and priority setting. Early career scholars should seek out these mentorship opportunities early on in an effort to best navigate the academic culture. This is especially important given that research suggests issues related to expectations and overload, role conflicts, and interacting with colleagues contribute most to work stress (Hendel & Horn, 2008). In addition, institutional policies allowing flexible work arrangements (i.e., telecommuting to meetings); part-time options for tenure-track faculty; standard stoppage or pausing of the tenure clock in cases of births, adoptions and medical and mental health problems; and tenure extensions should be used as necessary (Philipsen & Bostic, 2010). Where these supports are not in place, faculty—particularly tenured professors and administrators—can advocate for their development.

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### Conclusions

Once one reflects and understands his current situation regarding work-life balance, change may begin. Faculty members may choose to focus on improving one aspect of their situation at a time, or to increase the positive aspects of their job to increase their sense of satisfaction. It is important to note that this process is not simple or quick. This is an evolving process that continues throughout one's career. However, faculty members are better teachers, researchers, and administrators when perceptions of work-life balance are positive.

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