



The Balancing Act: Time Management for New Professors

Mitzi Lewis, Midwestern State University

Productivity and work/life balance are not concepts new or unique to academia. However, as communication channels change and we are able to connect with each other 24/7, expectations for increased productivity and faster response times have made this balance more difficult to achieve. Couple this with increasing accountability expectations and expanding diversification of student characteristics and needs, and we've got a real challenge, as Schuster and Finkelstein point out in [The American Faculty](#) (2008). With our current economy, resulting layoffs and cutbacks, and the need to do more with less, I believe many Americans, including educators, feel compelled to work harder to keep the jobs they have.

We professors wear many hats. [Haummel](#) (2010) developed a list of the top 50. When I started as a full-time professor, one of my new colleagues cautioned me that our jobs easily could become something we focus on 24/7. A recent study supports this feeling. In *New Challenges, New Priorities: The Experience of Generation X Faculty* (2010), conducted for The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Helms reports that Gen X faculty feel "harried . . . like they are 'running, running, running' all the time" (p. 15). One study participant reflected that the work required was "just an insane way to live your day, right?" Another participant said, "I've watched my father, who's also a professor and I watched him spend his entire life waiting for the next article to be done, and I'm trying to figure out how not to do that" (p. 17).

Does any of this sound familiar?

Those of us who work in small programs generally teach four classes a semester, and sometimes we also teach an overload. Our work with students for these classes often carries over to outside of the classroom. This is what we do. Why? We want to make a difference for our students – we want them to learn and grow so that when they leave us they are better prepared to live full, productive lives. Part of how we accomplish this goal is by being a role model for our students. Do we want them to work 24/7? No. Do we want them to have other interests? Yes. Do we want them to be multidimensional? Yes. This will help them be happier and more productive. We need to have work-life balance because it is good for us, it is good for the people we care about, it is good for our work, and it is good for students. If not, we do a disservice to all.

How do we, as academics, achieve this balance? Helms found that faculty "cobble it together" (p. 16) in different ways. Some have boundaries, keeping work and non-work life separate, while others integrate work and non-work life. While I still struggle with balancing all of my "hats," here is a two-step process that helps me.

Prioritize – Make a list of what is important to you.

Evaluate – Track your time for a few days. Does the way you spend your time reflect your priorities? If the answer is "no," make adjustments where you can. There will be areas over which you have less control than others, but sometimes thinking creatively can help you find solutions that didn't seem possible at

first.

Common sense, right? I found these steps to be eye-opening. My largest gaps were (a) the importance of my family and the time I wasn't spending with them and (b) the way I was dividing up my work time and how it didn't match up with how my institution evaluates my performance. To address these gaps, I put a structure in place.

First, I block out "family time" each week. During this time I don't engage in any work activities. Sometimes a little has to go a long way. Other times I am able to "find" time when I didn't expect it (e.g., switching workouts from time in the gym to bike rides with my husband has turned into some great, new, quality time together).

Then, I block out work time to more closely reflect what I need to be producing. I was committing a common mistake often made by new faculty and studied by [Boice](#) (1992): spending lots of time preparing for teaching, a significant amount of time on service, and too little time on research. Carrying out the newly blocked time is easier said than done, because there is built-in accountability for teaching and service, but not for research. [Brent and Felder](#) (2000), who sum up Boice's work, and [Rockquomore](#) (2010) pass along suggestions for planning and executing a work schedule. Their tips have helped me improve my balance of work time, but progress sometimes seems slow and I still have a way to go.

What are your biggest challenges? What works for you?

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Mitzi Lewis is an assistant professor at Midwestern State University.