

Graduate Member Musings

Finding Balance

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Properly appropriating one's time, energy, and resources between graduate school, work, and family life can be a challenge. Is it possible to attain balance with all of the competing priorities? In this column Eric and Willette draw on their experiences with time management, professional development, work, and family life.

Eric is a second-year doctoral student in the Instructional Design and Technology Program at Virginia Tech. Like many graduate students in instructional design, Eric already had fifteen years in and around the classroom before deciding to pursue his degree full-time. Eric believes that achieving balance in a graduate program is no easy feat but that developing proactive communication skills, sticking to a routine, and finding an outlet to reflect on your experience can help. He shares a few suggestions for balancing work, study, and home lives.

Proactively Communicate: If I could give one piece of advice to any incoming doctoral student it would be to establish a proactive communication strategy. When I first started my program, I did not want to bother anybody with too many emails or phone calls but over the first two years I have found several truths about communication across campus. First, never underestimate how many times you might need to send the same email

before you get a response. The reality is that even the best of us overlook an occasional message and that your professors want to help. Second, people appreciate quick responses. Rarely do people have doubts about your dedication to a project when they know they can ask you a question and get a quick response. Third, do not be afraid to ask how people would like to communicate. You just might be surprised as to who would prefer to text, email, call, Skype, etc. Finding out how somebody likes to communicate can really change the dynamic of your working relationships. Finally, take control of your incoming communication. As a place to start, I suggest exploring the features within your email client of choice. Does your email have a star or important function? Do you have the ability to automate communication tasks such as grouping emails by VIP or sending emails at a certain time? Do not underestimate how important these functions might be especially when working with groups that might change each semester. I found it helpful to automatically group and file emails from our LMS into a single folder to keep my inbox free. Additionally, be open to new forms of communication. Not on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or have a YikYak account? It might be time to explore what your fellow classmates and professors are using and get connected.

Find A Routine: After working full time as an instructional technologist for several years, it was both exciting and daunting to suddenly have a flexible schedule again. I know that some of my fellow students pull all-nighters or have bursts of productivity but through some experimentation I personally have found that the best way to balance my academic and family responsibilities is to have a definitive end to each workday. Regardless of assignment or task, I quit at 6:00 p.m. each evening and only make exceptions for night classes. Within this context I try to envision each of my assignments or research responsibilities associated with my fellowship through the lens of project management. I can not stress enough how important it has been to me to give myself enough time to explore options before beginning new assignments and explicitly discussing the end of projects with fellow students and professors before beginning new ones. The reality is that no research project or paper is truly finished. Give yourself a deadline and be ok with the consequences. You might be surprised by the results.

Do not Let Classes Get in the Way of Your Learning: I was given this advice very early into my program and have kept it in my back pocket throughout my experience. It is inevitable that at some point

during your studies that you might not be able to meet the expectations of conflicting responsibilities. Many students in graduate school incorrectly put their energy into their coursework first and relationships or assistantships later. Realistically, by the time you make it to your doctoral work you already have many of the skills needed to learn course content on your own. Understand that learning does not just take place in your coursework. You can always read up on a topic once you leave your program but you will never have the ability to build relationships with your fellow students or advisors once you leave. Along these same lines, do not schedule learning around your classes—schedule classes around learning. There is a surprising amount of learning that happens at social events within your department, local talks, and national conferences. Do not miss these opportunities to meet fellow scholars or hone your own presentation skills. These relationships and skills will carry on beyond your degree while no one is likely to ask you about how well you did in any specific course for the rest of your career.

Willette is in her third year in the Instructional Design and Development program at the University of South Alabama. She is a full-time student, part-time graduate assistant, part-time sociology instructor, and mother to her fourteen year old daughter. Here Willette discusses how she manages her many statuses and their sometimes conflicting roles.

I am three years into my program and I still struggle with balancing school, work, and family life. My academic life has not become quite all-consuming but it has come uncomfortably close to it. While I

have not become balanced in all areas, I have learned and adopted some practices that make the balancing task easier and less stressful. Four things that have helped me manage competing priorities are: utilizing my support system, scheduling according to my peak times, exercising, and using my time wisely.

A Support System: Recently, during a particularly stressful time of juggling the responsibilities of school work and family, I reached out to a mentor who gave me some advice that freed me. I had been held captive by the thought that being a super student, graduate assistant, and mom, required doing everything on my own. She advised “let your family help you.” Those words liberated me. In my mind not picking up my daughter from school and not being the one to fulfil other tasks such as taking her to dance practice, at all times without exception, was a sign that I was not a capable mother, student, or graduate assistant. I now know that the capable person uses all resources available to them, be it a family member to pick up a child from school, a study group to prepare for an exam, or a trusted friend or mentor for advice. I learned that using my support system does not diminish my ability as a student, mother, or graduate assistant.

Peak Times and Exercise: I thrive in productivity during two times: in the mornings and in the evenings. As a graduate assistant, I create my own schedule and so I schedule myself at least one day off to focus on school work during my peak times. Are you most alert and productive in morning, afternoon, or night? Use the information about when you are most productive to schedule reading, study and review time, and time to write.

Exercise has helped me achieve balance by serving as a way to relax

and as a non-academic recreational outlet. Last year I started a regular regimen of exercise and running. I noticed that during running my mind is clear and afterward I feel energized and ready to take on my day.

Small Windows of Time: Using small windows of time has allowed me to stay on schedule with projects and school work. For example, I read while I am waiting for my daughter to finish softball practice and during the few minutes before a meeting. I scan professional organization (e.g., www.aect.org) and news websites to stay abreast of current events and what is happening in my fields of instructional design and sociology. You might be surprised by how much you will accomplish and the depth of knowledge you will accumulate just by using small chunks of time to read an article or a research brief, check professional organization websites, review notes from a meeting, brainstorm, read homework questions or discussion forum prompts, and check Twitter and LinkedIn.

Half the battle is finding out what works for you, the other half is successful implementation. We hope these suggestions have provided you with some guideposts along the path of discovering what works for you and achieving balance in your school, work, and family life, or at least something close to it.

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