

Obtaining Work-Life Balance for Academic Administrators

by Jeffrey L. Buller

The blessing and the curse of academic life is that it rarely involves punching a clock. We're obliged to meet our classes at the times they're offered, hold an appropriate number of office hours, and attend the committees to which we're assigned. But we have a great deal of control over the rest of our schedule. If we prefer to prepare for our classes at 3:00 a.m. and stroll through the park each afternoon, that's our choice, as long as our work remains of high quality. Similarly, in administrative positions, although our time commitments may be more prescribed, we have more control than we may think. If we feel like taking a project home with us, we do. If we want to set our work aside for an entire weekend, the choice is ours. While we have less flexibility than faculty, we have a great deal more than do doctors, clergy, therapists, and those in other professions who remain on call even when they're not on duty.

The reality, however, is that most department chairs remain in the office long after "traditional hours" are over and devote much of their weekends to catching up on tasks or participating in "optional" events they were "voluntold" to attend. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can be a department chair (or dean or provost or even president) and still be a parent, spouse, friend, good citizen, and anything else you want to be if it's a high enough priority for you. All it takes is a little work-life balance.

Change Your Mindset

Most administrators who have a compulsion to work longer and harder than actually required—no matter whether we call them workaholics, work addicts, or just plain dedicated academic leaders—feel that, without their extra

effort, the job just won't get done—at least, not at the level of quality they desire. It would be satisfying to claim that the job performance of workaholics is far poorer than those who attain a greater work-life balance—satisfying, but not accurate. Gorgievski and Bakker (2010) studied the relationship between work addiction and work performance and found that the results are, at best, equivocal. While some research indicates that overachievers are viewed as more innovative than other employees, "there is no evidence showing that workaholism would improve (organizational) performance at all" (Gorgievski & Bakker, 2010, p. 270). As much as we might hope otherwise, work addicts were no less effective at their jobs than were those with better work-life balance. But let's consider those results in a different way: While it's true that excessive work didn't make workaholics any less effective than anyone else, it didn't make them any more effective either. Workaholics often use the claim of "I have to do this . . ." as a screen to hide the fact that they want to put in all those hours. But their work addiction really doesn't produce any better results than those of other people.

If our job performance doesn't improve by staying longer at the office, taking work home with us, or coming back to campus on holidays, why do we do it? Sometimes it's because being overworked makes us feel important. "They couldn't manage without me," we may think. "This place would absolutely fall apart." But you know what? It wouldn't. "This place" will do just fine. And someday it's going to get on just fine without you. So let it get on just fine without a little more of you now. Ask yourself what's the worst thing that can happen if you put in a regular eight-

hour day and then go home without taking anything office related with you. Your mind will probably race immediately to an apocalypse of lost accreditation, angry supervisors, and students who can't graduate on time. But one of the secrets of work-life balance is that none of those things is going to happen. Try it tonight. Leave the office at 5:00 p.m. or whenever the typical workday ends. Leave your work on your desk. Don't check your email until you come in tomorrow. And when you arrive at your office, you'll see—the world will be getting on just fine.

Learn to Delegate

Another reason why so many of us work harder with fewer returns is that we don't delegate responsibilities well. That's not a surprise; no one ever taught us how to do it. Surveys of college administrators repeatedly indicate that very few department chairs receive any administrative training at all (see, for example, Cipriano and Riccardi, 2010). But as the title of Donna Genett's book on effective delegation puts it, *If You Want It Done Right, You Don't Have to Do It Yourself!* (2004). There are several ways to learn about how shared leadership can both lighten your workload and create professional opportunities for others. Fred Pryor Seminars/Career Track (pryor.com) offers a four-hour course on CD or downloadable MP3 on "How to Delegate Work and Ensure It's Done Right." The Crisp Fifty-Minute Training Series includes the self-study course *Delegation Skills for Leaders*, which features such units as "Deciding What to Delegate," "Delegating to Develop Employees," and "Getting the Results You Expect" (Finch & Maddux, 2006). Day-long workshops on effective delegation are offered by many leadership consultant and training firms such as Dalton Alliances (daltonalliances.com), ATLAS Leadership Training LLC (atlasleadership.com), and The Training Clinic (thetrainingclinic.com). Finally, an experienced chair may well be able

to mentor you in how to select tasks that can be delegated, people who can be trusted with them, and monitor progress without “hovering.” No matter which of these methods you choose to improve your delegation skills, the most important lesson to learn is that assuming you need to do everything yourself is just an illusion. Your department will be better and your work-life balance will improve if you get others to join you on your journey.

Set Your Goals

Many of us may work compulsively because we feel our efforts are bringing us closer to a goal. “If only I can achieve X,” we think, “then I can finally settle in and start living my life.” But the truth is that there are no plateaus unless you make them. Whenever you climb to the top of any organizational pyramid, you simply find yourself at the base of the next pyramid. Are you working hard as a department chair so that you can be a dean? Will you then work even harder as a dean so that you can become a provost? When you’re a provost, will you increase your pace so that you can become a president? And the pyramids don’t stop there: system chancellor, member of the state higher education council, chair of the state higher education council, president of a regional accreditation organization, president of AACSU/AAC&U/APLU/ACE/CHEA, Secretary of Education, and on into infinity. There is no top rung on the ladder because each rung only puts you on the next ladder. Academic leaders thus need to ask themselves: Where am I really going and why do I want to be there?

Work-life balance occurs when we stop thinking “I want to be here so that I can get there” and start thinking “I want to be here so that I can do this.” This mindset requires that you know what “this” is, and many administrators have a hard time identifying their ultimate goal. They became chairs or deans because no one else wanted the job, or it was their turn,

or they were attracted by a higher income, but they didn’t stop to analyze these motives very deeply. Certainly, if they expected to rise to higher administrative positions, they became masters at giving the correct answers to the standard interview question “Why are you interested in this job?” They spoke of their commitment to supporting high standards of education, building consensus, and increasing diversity. They even believed in these worthy causes and took steps to promote them. But they eventually came to feel that they couldn’t really make a significant difference until they reach the next level, and thus the never-ending search for career advancement continued.

Achieving work-life balance means determining the proper rung on your own personal ladder and then avoiding all the temptations to climb further. A time has to come when you stop preparing to live your life and actually start to live it. Some people really should be chancellor, head of the NIH, or chair of an international agency on higher education policy, but not all of us. Only you can tell what the proper role is for you that keeps the rest of your life in balance. But you’re unlikely to recognize that level unless you first know what your priorities are and how they may be evolving.

Understand Your Priorities

Life isn’t stagnant. Your priorities at twenty-five are different from those at forty-five, which are themselves different from those you have at sixty-five or eighty-five. It’s important to reflect periodically on how you’ve changed in terms of what’s most important to you now and how you need to act as a result. One easy way to conduct this self-inventory is to take a piece of paper or open a word processing document and create four headings:

- Continuing Priorities
- Increasing Priorities
- Decreasing Priorities
- Low Priorities

Enter items into each of these categories that reflect not just your professional interests but important aspects of your personal and family life, core values and beliefs, leisure interests, and hopes for the future. While all these categories are significant, the section to give special attention to is the one headed *Increasing Priorities*. It’s here that you’ll gain a sense of how your direction may have changed since the last time you performed a similar reflection. Moreover, where does there appear to be the greatest disparity between this category and your priorities that are already low or decreasing? For instance, if spending hour after hour in meetings is a low priority for you while sharing experiences with your children or grandchildren is an increasing priority, this can be a sign it’s time to make some changes in how you deal with commitments in order to achieve better work-life balance.

Not all the changes you decide to make, however, will require you to resign your position or return to the faculty. There are steps you can take to regain control of your priorities even as you continue in your current position. For instance, you can begin blocking out quality time on your calendar:

- *Clinics*: Blocks of time when appointments aren’t necessary. People can drop by with short requests, such as asking a quick question or having a routine document signed.
- *Rounds*: Regularly scheduled walks outside your office to see how things are going in your area, have impromptu conversations, and address issues informally.
- *Quiet hours*: Periods when everyone in the office focuses exclusively on paperwork. Appointments and meetings aren’t allowed during this period. Calls are directed to voicemail to be returned later.

Actions such as these not only balance your workload by using your time more effectively, but they also give you direct experience of a vital truth about how to get the most important things accomplished. As Torosyan (2010)

noted, "Don't just list priorities. Schedule them" (p. 8).

Conclusion

One final element in achieving proper work-life balance involves how we view our workspace. Most offices used by department chairs almost scream "WORK!" the moment anyone walks through the door. The fluorescent lighting is harsh. The furniture is industrial. The walls are white, beige, or battleship gray. Not everyone has the luxury of personalizing this space beyond a few photographs or personal mementos, but if you're able to do more, it can alter your entire attitude. You may function better in an environment with softer lighting, a water effect such as a fountain or water wall, ambient music in the background, and dark woods muting the room's institutional appearance. Alternatively, you may prefer bright, natural light, a color palette inspired by Monet, and driftwood furnishings that break the sharp angles of the room's rectangular shape. Either way, once you can look at your office as a place where your internal batteries are recharged instead of drained, you'll have made

important progress toward your goal of establishing work-life balance. ▲

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