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Teaching in the Context of Professional Development and Work-Private Life Balance

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New graduate student: “It is way harder than undergrad, but if I shift all my research, coursework, and TA duties to Mon-Fri 10-5, I still have plenty of time for other life activities! I can do this!”

Advanced graduate student: “It is not easy, but if I work hard on research, teaching, and writing my dissertation, I can still take one day off per week for other life activities. Unless no writing gets done...stupid dissertation!”

Assistant Professor: “Balance-schmalance, I’ll worry about balance later. If I work really hard on my research, teaching, advising, writing, and service activities every day, 7 days a week, I can still get 5-6 hours of sleep a night!” (Quinn, 2010, p. 15)

Graduate students and new faculty members will knowingly chuckle at Quinn’s (2010) exaggerated description of our professional experiences. If we have not personally lived through prolonged periods of such frantic activity, we know many colleagues who have. Tales of constant busyness are a strong and widespread source of camaraderie; yet we also know at least a few individuals who are productive in such environments and even maintain a rich personal life.

Juggling the multiple roles of a graduate student or new professor has always been challenging and, by all indications, the expectations are rising. With state legislatures and private donors providing lower levels of funding for higher education, universities have turned to increased enrollment to make up the difference. One result has been larger classes that bring the challenge of maintaining interactive teaching while also dealing with the greater number of student management issues (e.g., illness, disability accommodations, problematic conduct). Another result has been larger teaching loads and spending more time documenting activities through learning goals and outcomes assessment.

In disciplines whose scholarship is driven by external funding, new professors and graduate students are being asked to write grant proposals as never before. In addition, the push for universities to be more fully integrated into the surrounding towns and cities has produced a greater emphasis on service learning in classes and expectations for community service among graduate students and faculty.

Although a job in an academic setting has a number of very positive features including variety, flexibility, and considerable freedom (Prentice-Dunn, 2006a), the number and magnitude of time demands appear to be at an all-time high. This situation occurs at a time when, in unprecedented numbers, graduate students and new professors are seeking employment that still preserves personal and family time. In a recent survey of over 8,000 doctoral students, Mason, Goulden, and Frasch (2009) found that 84% of women and 74% of men were concerned about the family friendliness of their career choice. In that regard, tenure track positions at research-intensive universities were seen as appreciably less family-friendly than were teaching-intensive colleges, policy or managerial careers, and research careers outside academia. The concerns were of sufficient magnitude that a substantial proportion of students (especially in the sciences) were redirecting their career goals once in graduate school.

To increase the retention of promising scholars, some universities have begun to address workload issues through innovative practices such as lengthening the tenure clock and placing a greater emphasis on research quality rather than quantity. As such efforts take hold, it remains important for graduate students and new faculty members to take individual actions to make their work efficient, enjoyable, and enriching. The goal of this chapter is to provide guidelines to help students and professors stay productive while recognizing the importance of issues outside the workplace.

Working Smart

Graduate students have substantial demands on their time. However, these responsibilities are usually divided into compartments (e.g., assistantship, one's own courses). In comparison, new faculty members have much less structure imposed from without (Huss, 2006; McClain, 2003). Whereas students receive frequent feedback through evaluations and grades, new professors must rely on self-assessment to supplement the infrequent formal feedback that they receive. Nonetheless, the considerable overlap in duties means that general advice for one group is likely to apply to the other. Royse (2001) calls such recommendations "working smart."

Permission to be Less Than Perfect

Graduate programs are full of highly intelligent students with a strong desire to perform well. However, such high achievement motivation often becomes stressful when students confront the multiple demands of graduate school. Clearly understanding that one cannot maintain impossibly high standards for every new task or responsibility is crucial. In fact, carefully targeting some work components for excellent performance and others for good (or even adequate) performance can be liberating, reducing one's overall stress level so that all tasks are done better than they otherwise would be.

Find Out What is Valued

Royse (2001) suggested that you ask questions of those in a position to help you. For graduate students, that may mean going beyond departmental orientation programs to

befriending successful advanced students about beneficial courses, training experiences, and tips on applying for positions. New faculty members will benefit from asking about available formal and informal mentoring programs as well as operational expectations for tenure and promotion. Once the criteria for success are known, they must become the lens through which one sees virtually all work activities.

Time Management

Zinn (2004) noted that it is all too easy to stay busy with unimportant activities. Thus, knowing how you spend your day is crucial to meeting one's professional goals. Logging the actual time spent on various tasks over a few weeks will allow you to identify "time robbers" (Royse, 2001) that can be curtailed to address career goals more directly (Myers, 2005).

Breaking large-scale tasks into smaller, more manageable, units can provide a needed sense of accomplishment and movement toward completing the goal. Maintaining a task list is a useful way of keeping up with such activities and serves to de-clutter one's mind. Periodically reordering the list to fit emerging priorities keeps it useful (McClain, 2003).

Immediate demands on our daily time tend to get addressed first. Thus, important tasks for career advancement such as writing and conducting research are often delayed (McClain, 2003). To overcome this tendency, proactively schedule the time to devote to such activities. Schedule blocks of time away from daily distractions to work on one's dissertation; find a different location if one's office is not conducive to concentrated work. One of my colleagues, a prolific writer, notes that starting a writing session with a defined ending time results in more a more focused effort (S. Brodsky, personal communication, September 9, 2010).

Teaching

Having taught a course on college teaching for the past two decades, I have had the opportunity to observe many students who first thrived in graduate school and then as assistant professors. They are skilled, enthusiastic presenters who build a supportive environment in the classroom (Polick, Cullen, & Buskist, 2010; Prentice-Dunn, 2006b). As graduate students, they are eager to master a variety of instructional methods such as participatory lectures, active learning, multimedia, and in-class writing. Through considerable effort they develop a large repertoire of techniques for effective teaching. When they become faculty members they are flexible enough to adjust how they teach to free time to devote to additional aspects of being a professor such as teaching multiple courses, advising, service, mentoring, and establishing a program of scholarship.

“Canny” Preparation

I am not advocating mediocre teaching. However, I am suggesting what McClain (2003) called “canny” preparation. Instead of using an hour to locate that perfect alternative video clip or develop another demonstration, it is wise periodically to forego that level of preparation to carve out time for another aspect of one’s job (Hackney, 2004). When a batch of papers is to be submitted, plan a guest speaker or another low-preparation topic for the following class session (McClain, 2003). During a semester in which several writing projects are due, consider teaching multiple sections of the same course to save on prep time.

Bunching Courses

Some instructors, me included, find that teaching is both rewarding and draining. It takes time for us to gear up for the classroom and then wind down from it. I gradually recognized that on such days, I got little else accomplished. Taking Myers’ (2005) advice, I now group my

courses so that I have days that are primarily devoted to teaching and others that are devoted to writing and service. My teaching days include classroom instruction, office hours, grading assignments, class preparation, and the like. With such an arrangement, my teaching days are more enjoyable and my other days are more productive.

Staying Motivated

To remain a good instructor, one must stay energized. One of the best ways to remain excited and also learn new techniques is to be around others who share an interest in teaching. Attending regional and national teaching conferences is an ideal way to do that (Bernstein, 2005). I always return from such meetings armed with new methods to try, new colleagues to serve as resources, and a rekindled enthusiasm about what I am doing.

In addition to attending conferences that energize one's teaching, Bernstein (2005) suggested that is okay to be a bit selfish. In other words, try to keep teaching enjoyable not just for your students, but also for yourself. For example, using a variety of approaches in class to communicate course content leads not only to better learning outcomes, but also more satisfaction for you. Such variety will help sustain you over the long run.

Research

Graduate students must produce a dissertation to obtain a degree and often considerably more scholarship to be hired as a faculty member. Research expectations for new professors will of course vary according to the amount of teaching one must do; however, few contemporary positions come without some research expectations for career advancement. Thus students and faculty alike need to find ways to produce scholarly works.

Team Up

Perhaps the most effective way to produce a great deal of research is to collaborate with others. I stumbled upon this technique by accident in graduate school when colleagues and I met regularly to discuss common interests. After brainstorming multiple studies that we would like to conduct, we divided them among ourselves, with each person taking the lead role on 1-2 projects while maintaining a secondary role on additional studies. The result was many more publications (some first-authored) than any of us could have produced working solo. Of course, one's collaborators can be at other institutions as well. Connections made at conferences can increase the number of locations where data can be collected simultaneously.

Dual Goals

Graduate students should take advantage of the assignments in the courses that they are taking. For example, for a required literature review, select a topic that has received insufficient attention, thereby making the paper publishable with little additional work when the course is over. Courses may involve a project such as developing an educational or psychological measure; careful choice of the topic may lead to a publication. Some courses taught by graduate students and new professors may be appropriate for a group or individual research project that can lead to a publication co-authored by the student(s) and instructor. Finally, aspects of innovative teaching (e.g., multimedia, in-class exercises, student journals) may provide the opportunity to collect data on effectiveness that can then be submitted to a teaching-related journal in one's discipline.

Readily Accessible Data

Huss (2006) advised students to design their theses and dissertations with multiple publications as a desired goal. For example, a literature review or proposed theory may be published as paper separate from an empirical study on the same topic. In addition, collecting data for two studies simultaneously is often an efficient use of the researcher's time and target population. Finally, students and faculty alike should also stay alert to the availability of large data sets collected by others. Investigators and agencies that control such resources often seek assistance and welcome an offer to take the lead role in studying a portion of the data set.

Service

Service entails a variety of possible domains including department and institution, profession, and community. Graduate students rarely receive preparation in this area and are often surprised as new professors when they encounter appreciable service time demands. To contribute is expected and laudable; however, one must keep in mind that service activities are rarely regarded as highly as teaching and scholarship. Therefore, one must choose wisely and even learn how to politely say "no." In deciding whether to volunteer, Royse (2001) suggested considering (a) the amount of your time a committee will need, (b) the relative risk to you if the topic is politically charged, (c) the visibility it will give you, and (d) whether you can make use of your expertise. In general, one should take on service activities slowly so that you can do them well (and even enjoy them).

Balance in Work and Personal Life

Popular lore suggests that having a successful career and a gratifying personal life are often, even usually, incompatible. Yet growing evidence suggests that each aspect can exert a positive influence on the other (Smith, 2002). For example, men who have a satisfying life at

home experience less stress when problems arise at work (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Being involved in child care is associated with a husband's psychological well-being and a wife's higher rating of their relationship. Based on such evidence, Grzywacz and Marks (2000) suggested that work and private life are more appropriately regarded as domains that can potentially affect each other in positive ways rather than automatically being in conflict.

Making Personal Care “Your Job”

Although most graduate students and new professors enjoy many aspects of their careers, the number and nature of new work requirements can be daunting. In the press of daily tasks, the first things to be delayed are exercise, personal reflection, and time with friends and family. However, there is now abundant evidence that neglecting such activities not only leads to reduced immune system functioning, but also decreased work quality. To avoid these negative impacts, exercise and other personal activities must become as high a priority as one's career. Although this reorientation is substantial and difficult for almost all of us, it pays off in terms of better physical and psychological health and lower likelihood of career burnout in the long run. This action remains primarily an individual decision although it is becoming increasingly easier to find training programs and work settings that value such balance.

Practical Steps

Scheduling exercise and other forms of “down time” is crucial to this reorientation. For example, exercising or meditating prior to going to the office is a practical method to ensure that such activity gets done instead of waiting until later in the day when unforeseen events can derail one's plans. Following the “working smart” recommendations described earlier in the chapter opens spots in one's week for such important events. They also enable one to plan for breaks

such as hobbies or weekend travel with reduced guilt and without being swamped with work chores upon return.

Developing at least a few friendships outside of the work setting can give us time to appreciate our careers as well as learn new perspectives (Zinn, 2004). Setting reasonable boundaries between personal time and work is also important, but difficult to follow in the age of instant communication technology. For example, some of the most productive and happiest graduate students and faculty colleagues I know will not check e-mail or text messages after a certain time each day and on an entire day on most weekends.

Conclusion

The beginning of a career is a time of great excitement and some anxiety. Regardless of the setting or type of position, it takes a great deal of energy to establish oneself as graduate student or faculty member. However, in each of the teaching, scholarship, and service domains, there are several strategies available that will enable you to work more efficiently. Using such techniques within the context of a rich personal life can enable you to meet professional goals as you enjoy what you do.

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