

What about Us? The Quality of Work-Life of Adult Educators

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Abstract

Adult educators are often concerned with the well-being of our students, but how often do we consider our own quality of work-life? The purpose of the discussion session this paper is based on was to provide a safe space for participants to “Gripe and Grow.” Participants were invited to share issues (gripe) that negatively affect their quality of work-life with the intent to, as a collective group, identify strategies to address the issue (grow).

Keywords: Work-Life, Quality of Life, Adult Educators

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The pressure to perform to a degree of excellence is common across most career fields. As expectations to accomplish more with less (and to do it faster) increase, so too does the burden to find a healthy balance between personal and professional responsibilities. Work-life balance, defined as one’s ability to meet the demands of work and family (Delecta, 2011), has become a fundamental issue in organizations over the past three decades. The concept of work-life became prominent in the United States during the 1970s as manufacturing companies opened up to the idea of addressing worker involvement in decision making and worker satisfaction and as more women entered the workforce (Guest, 1979; Latz & Rediger, 2015). According to Lockwood (2003), three major factors led to an increased focus on work-life balance in organizations: global competition, renewed interest in family values, and an aging workforce (p. 2). How one balances job/career expectations with other obligations, both work- and non-work related, may have positive or negative implications on job performance, job satisfaction, emotional well-being, and a sense of contentment (Baral & Bhargava, 2010; Hughes & Bozionelos, 2007). This has forced both employers and employees alike to address work-life balance as part of improved organizational practice.

The purpose of this paper was to use collective wisdom to address adult education faculty work-life balance in three primary areas: teaching, scholarship, and service. To do this, the presenters developed a presentation method called “Gripe and Grow.” In a Gripe and Grow session, participants are asked to share specific issues (gripe). After sharing the issue, participants work together to develop strategies (grow) to address the concern. In the following paper, a brief review of the literature on faculty work-life is presented. Then, the results of the Grip and Grow session on faculty work-life balance are discussed. Finally, suggestions are offered on how faculty might support each other in defining and reaching work-life balance.

Faculty Work-Life

Faculty are commonly evaluated using three categories: teaching, scholarship, and service. Each category affects work-life balance, and work-life balance can affect faculty effectiveness in each category. Although studies show that in general, faculty adore students and love their work (Latz & Rediger, 2015; Levin et al., 2013; Levin, Kater, & Wagoner, 2011), interactions with students

can negatively influence faculty quality of work-life. Similarly, an incongruence between expectations in productivity/scholarship and instructional/research support negatively affects the quality of faculty work-life. Lastly, faculty are required to provide service to the institution (e.g., committee work) and the profession, which can create time demands that strain the work-life balance.

Research on faculty work-life has become more prevalent, although the body of literature is not as robust as it is in other professions. According to Enders et al. (2015), faculty who are considered “burned out” are more likely to report a poor quality of work-life, a feeling that work is done in crisis mode, a belief that quantity of work is valued over quality, and a lower sense of job satisfaction. Welch, Wiehe, Palmer-Smith, and Dankoski (2011) found dissatisfaction with workload, availability of support, and low salary affected quality of work-life and undermined faculty teaching capacity. Institutional support in ensuring compatibility between personal/family responsibilities and an academic career is a positive predictor of faculty work-life balance (Denson, Szelenyi, & Bresonis, 2017), yet institutional policies to ensure faculty work-life balance are not always used in practice (Lester, 2015).

Issues in Faculty Work-Life Balance for Adult Educators

During the AHEA conference session, participants were encouraged to reflect on the session information and provide their own ideas on how faculty in the field of Adult Education can work to balance out the pressure to meet all professional expectations. Participants were invited to discuss an issue related to work-life balance, expressing what they would change about the issue if they could, indicating what was learned from it, and determining how to move forward with a plan to fix it. Following is information on teaching, scholarship, and service that was discussed in the “Gripe and Grow” session.

Two factors identified as contributing to an imbalance in work-life relating to teaching were student expectations and teaching load. Participants characterized issues with student expectations in multiple ways. A common disrupter of work-life balance stemmed from an incongruence between the time students felt it should take faculty to complete grading of assignments compared to the time it actually takes to provide appropriate and relevant feedback. Additionally, expectations for responding to questions and inquiries outside of stated office hours, at any time of the day or night, on weekdays or weekends, put increased pressure on faculty to be available to students at all times. It was discussed that, with regard to teaching load, faculty are carrying heavier course loads than ever, while still maintaining scholarship and service requirements, resulting in a loss of down-time and an increase in teaching duties encroaching on social or family time.

With the ever-present push to do more with fewer resources, scholarship requirements for faculty—on top of their teaching load—placed an additional strain on work-life balance. Expectations for scholarship were associated with feelings of work-life imbalance for session participants who did not receive adequate institutional support to meet those expectations. This included faculty teaching a four-course load per semester, sometimes with a one-course overload, and yet being required to meet scholarship expectations of one or more peer-reviewed

publications per year. Moreover, faculty at teaching institutions were beginning to feel pressure to undertake grant writing in addition to their publication requirements.

One participant gave an example of securing a nine-month teaching contract, but then using the elusive “summer vacation” to catch up on research, grant writing, and course preparation duties that were limited during the regular academic term. The result is that the faculty member works longer days than they would during the nine-month contracted period, most of the time for no additional pay, to meet institutional expectations. What is the answer? It can vary from faculty member to faculty member, but institutional awareness of the imbalance occurring is important, and then an effort to rectify the issue is key. If the institution ignores it, attrition among faculty occurs and the resulting financial consequences of replacing quality faculty affect an already-strained budget. One solution presented was to utilize the institution’s tenured faculty to advocate for their non-tenured peers, as tenured faculty likely have more power and influence to make institutional changes.

Session participants’ issues with service in relation to work-life balance also reflected the general theme of high expectations and limited time. With the majority of work hours (and personal time) being dedicated to teaching and scholarship, some participants struggled to provide service to the institution through committee involvement, service to the discipline through involvement in professional organizations, and in most cases, involvement in the community in which the institution is located through volunteer hours in civic organizations. In general, participants enjoyed the various forms of service, but lacked the time necessary to find balance while also focusing on teaching and scholarship.

Strategies for Work-Life Balance

Participants in this session identified work-life balance issues in three broad categories: teaching, scholarship, and service. Latz and Rediger (2015) found that faculty develop strategies to reach and maintain balance, and many participants had suggestions to address work-life balance. For teaching, participants suggested the value of setting fair expectations for student contact, including timelines for feedback, availability, and response time, in the syllabus. Some participants also found that it helped to have self-discipline and schedule personal time during which nothing work-related was done. Additionally, participants felt it was important to have support from more senior faculty, in the form of mentoring and coaching, to guide junior faculty in reaching work-life balance.

The increased focus on scholarship, particularly at teaching institutions, and the need to apply for external funding created stress regarding work-life balance. Participants identified the need for institutional support as paramount in having the ability to effectively teach and produce scholarly work. In addition to institutional support, some participants suggested working with institutional colleagues and/or peers within one’s discipline to produce scholarship. Institutional support was also identified as important in the grant-writing process. One participant suggested working with college/university departments with grant-writing functions, such as sponsored programs or advancement. Lastly, some participants stressed the importance of redefining scholarship to include activity outside of peer-reviewed publications. This included the development of

manuals, course development, workshops, and other products that demonstrate academic work. Scholarship expectations appeared to have the greatest impact on work-life balance.

Conclusion

Similar to other professions, adult educators struggle to attain work-life balance. Work-life balance can be difficult to attain and address as it is dependent upon the individual faculty member. However, there are some strategies adult education faculty can utilize to reach work-life balance. Through a Gripe and Grow session, participants identified teaching load and student expectations to influence work-life balance but suggested setting clear guidelines for students and themselves could positively affect work-life balance. Scholarship was identified as a primary issue in reaching balance, especially in situations of increased requirements with a lack of institutional support. Participants suggested working in teams and redefining scholarship as strategies to increase scholarly production and reach work-life balance. Balancing work and personal responsibilities can be difficult, but by relying on the support of peers and advocating for increased institutional support, the delicate balance of work and personal life can be a realistic goal for faculty in adult education.

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