

Master's Student Life: The Balance Between Student and Professional

Sean A. Grube, Katie Cedarholm, Camilla Jones, Merrily Dunn*

This manuscript explores the concept of balance for master's students enrolled in student affairs preparation programs in the Southeast and Midwest. It provides research on the ways balance is restricted for master's students who are employed in a student affairs setting while also enrolled in preparation programs, and it investigates themes which emerged during interviews on the concept of balance such as defining the concept of balance and establishing priorities. The study also examines the role conflict graduate students experience.

Graduate student success is critical to the field of student affairs. Not only are master's students the future of the profession, they also help staff offices and departments through graduate assistantships and internships. Master's students provide a significant resource to student affairs divisions at significantly less cost than that of full-time staff members. Because of this value, it is essential that graduate students be prepared to be successful in the workforce. It is also critically important that graduate students have positive and substantive classroom and practicum or internship experiences to better enhance the odds of retaining them in the profession.

For graduate students in student affairs preparation programs to succeed in the classroom, their assistantship site or full-time jobs, and their personal lives, they must have a strong sense of life balance. For the purpose of this article, life balance is defined as finding a personal equilibrium in the four major life roles of family, work, leisure, and education (Hansen, 1997). This concept of life balance is often difficult to achieve, and therefore, both graduate students and professionals within higher education must examine the role of balance within their lives and how this balance can be better achieved in the workplace.

* Sean A. Grube is a hall director at Iowa State University. Katie Cedarholm is the assistant director of first-year programs at Mercer University. Camilla Jones is a residence life coordinator at Kansas State University. Merrily Dunn is an assistant professor in the Counseling and Human Services Development/College Student Affairs Department at the University of Georgia. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to grube@iastate.edu.

Challenges to Achieving Balance

Role Conflict

Cooke, Sims, and Peyrefitte (1995) stated that graduate students often sacrifice more than undergraduates to pursue their degree, with the most common sacrifices being time and money. By accepting a position as a graduate assistant, a graduate student enters into a mixed role of responsibility by serving as both a professional and a student. This mixed role creates conflict, often causing graduate students to question their priorities as students and professionals-in-training (Turman, 2001). This conflict may cause undue stress for graduate students seeking to achieve balance in their lives.

In the roles of both a professional-in-training and a student, graduate students in student affairs are typically encouraged to assume a variety of duties such as advising student groups, maintaining their course load, and counseling students. Assuming these roles makes creating a balanced personal life an extremely difficult task. Conflict occurs due to these multiple roles played on campus and the additional responsibilities of adulthood and increased independence.

In addition, the difference between the role of involved undergraduate student leader and graduate assistant or supervisor can often pose a difficult transition. Many graduate students in student affairs were active as student leaders during their undergraduate careers; however, in their transition from undergraduate to graduate student, they evolve into a role which often requires working with undergraduate students very close to their own age. This potential conflict between the roles of friend and supervisor is often challenging for graduate students to navigate. Despite this role conflict, graduate students in student affairs may also retain the role of involved student leader.

The numerous and varied tasks graduate students perform to meet the expectations of faculty, supervisors, and themselves creates an unmanageable burden. These tasks include, but are certainly not limited to, advising student groups, leading student personnel associations, adjudicating conduct violations, completing significant reading assignments, and coordinating group projects. For graduate students to achieve balance, it is important for them to recognize the multiple roles in their lives. They must learn how to prioritize and integrate them in order to avoid potential conflict and make the most of the numerous opportunities available in graduate school.

The Nature of Being a Graduate Student

The concept of balance for a graduate student begins with the selection of a graduate preparation program. Barratt (2004), in preparing an article on the selection of the graduate program for ACPA's Commission on Professional

Preparation, examined the questions prospective graduate students must ask themselves in relation to their interests, needs, and expectations. These questions include (a) thesis or comprehensive exam, (b) full-time or part-time (c) graduate assistantship or full-time work, and (d) counseling or administration based. Additionally, the practicum or field experiences required for the program to meet standards established by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) adds an additional responsibility to a graduate student who may already be overwhelmed by multiple roles. With preparation programs having different expectations concerning practicum experiences, internships, and assistantships, potential graduate students must make an informed selection of the program that allows for and assists them in creating a balanced lifestyle.

With the requisite coursework of most graduate preparation programs which meet CAS Standards being between 36 and 48 hours (Coomes & Gerda, 2003), students are confronted with approximately two years of studying, papers, group projects, and examinations. Potential graduate students must examine the curriculum in terms of institutional fit, desired coursework, faculty involvement, and classmates who can serve as a support network and mentors. While enrollment in graduate preparation programs provides an incredible opportunity to gain an introductory experience within the field of student affairs, the overlapping roles of student, employee, intern, and colleague often result in irreconcilable and competing demands.

Role Modeling

Graduate students entering a new position and phase in their lives are searching for new mentors and role models. For students with an assistantship, their supervisors often become this role model. Winston and Creamer (2002) state that supervision is not simply a managerial role, but a role that focuses on individuals' personal growth, developing competencies, and exploring their lives holistically. Due to their obvious influence, supervisors should be cognizant of how they create balance within their own lives and the message it can send to their students.

Examining Balance for Graduate Students

Graduate students in student affairs professional preparation programs assume multiple roles in order to successfully navigate both their academic and work-related careers. Not only do these graduate students take classes, but they are also required to devote significant amounts of time and energy to graduate assistantships or professional positions. For these students, finding a successful balance among these multiple roles holds the capacity to provide additional sources of social support, increased skills, and heightened self-esteem and well being (Baruch & Barnett, 1987). When successful balance is not achieved, over

commitment can lead to diminished effectiveness and personal detriment (Kuther, 2003). Kuther stated, "When challenges exceed capacities, graduate students may be encouraged to cut corners, potentially damaging their own professional development and the welfare of their students" (p. 223).

Poock (2001) maintained that for many years professional development has been a primary focus for students in professional schools, but only recently has it been brought to the forefront of graduate education. Poock postulates five competencies gained by a graduate student through professional development including (a) communication, (b) leadership, (c) teaching and instruction, (d) professional adaptability, and (e) self-awareness. While professional development is generally thought to be a positive influence in a professional's experience, the desire to gain a variety of experiences can often lead to over commitment. This over commitment sets a dangerous pattern for a new professional's career. Ultimately over commitment has the potential to limit the effectiveness of a graduate student or new professional, becoming detrimental to the competencies gained through professional development.

In their research with graduate student coaches, Dunn and Dunn (1997) found that graduate students grew frustrated with increased responsibility or tasks without the authority for decision-making. As the staff person most likely perceived as the "go between" for coaches and players, one graduate student stated, "I feel like I am not an integral part of the team. I do not fit in as a player or a coach" (Dunn & Dunn, 1997, p. 264). This statement exemplifies the role of graduate students in a student affairs setting; they are not considered professionals, and they are not simply students. Their position lies in a less well-defined area, leaving the students feeling they must excel in both areas in order to be accepted as a serious person entering the profession. This conflict leaves little time for personal well being, contributing to the effects of an unbalanced life.

Admittedly, the concept of life balance can be difficult for anyone to achieve. Within the field of student affairs, this concept can be increasingly difficult as a result of the nature of the position. Many positions within student affairs demand both long and odd hours, and graduate students must deal with irregular work schedules while attempting to balance coursework. As Toma, Clark, & Jacobs (1998) stated,

The job is often at its most demanding and interesting during those hours when many professionals have typically gone home for the evening. In a time-intensive field like student affairs, with its nebulous borders, professionals commonly perceive the problem to be work crowding out time that can be spent at home. (p. 69)

This dilemma makes it more difficult for graduate students to prioritize more personal time in order to achieve better life balance. However, achieving balance is a necessary step in a graduate student's continued development. As Lindberg (1995) wrote, "I have yet to meet the first person who said on his or her death bed, 'Gosh, I wish that I had spent more time at the office'" (p. L-86).

While careers in student affairs are worthy and honorable in their goal to positively impact the development of students, it is important to recognize that sacrificing one's own well being to positively impact the well being of others yields little net effect. Balance is difficult, but as Diekow (2004) acknowledged, although each person may define balance differently, the prevalent notion is that striving for balance is a positive move.

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this pilot research study is to determine how graduate students in student affairs preparation programs view both the graduate experience and the concept of balance in their lives. Because the nature of this research question is so fluid, it was most appropriate to approach this study with a qualitative lens. As Merriam (2002) stated, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context" (p. 4).

Based on relevant research, a protocol was designed to provide a framework for the personal interviews. Topic areas of the protocol included whether incorporating theory to practice was difficult or easy to achieve, steps taken to achieve balance (Cooper & Saunders, 2003), setting priorities (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002), professional development within graduate preparation programs (Poock, 2001), and achieving balance (Dunn, 2002). This framework, in turn, informed the questions used in the interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with the interviewers detailing the responses of the participants. This format allowed additional questions to emerge based on the responses of the participants. Responses were recorded by the interviewers for future analysis.

Sample

The sample consisted of 10 students (seven female, three male) enrolled in master's degree programs in student affairs and higher education at four Doctoral-Extensive institutions in the Southeast and Midwest. Two of the institutions incorporate a cohort model in their preparation program while the other two do not. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method (Mertens, 1998) based on the physical location of the three

interviewers in relation to the participants. While not ideal, the convenience sampling method was the only realistic method when considering budgetary limitations and the timeline of the interview process. All participants held assistantships in student affairs functional areas, in areas ranging from leadership programs to university housing. Four of the participants graduated in May 2004, while the other six participants are scheduled to graduate May 2005.

Data Analysis

As the interviews were conducted, interviewers attempted to identify trends and patterns emerging in the participants. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2002), which involves using emerging data to develop themes and categories across interviews. Responses were analyzed based on gender and further organized for documentation purposes. Because qualitative research is often viewed as an interpretive approach, biases are considered inherent. Admittedly, the three lead researchers are recent graduates from student affairs preparation programs; therefore, the data collected were interpreted through their qualitative lenses.

Results

During the course of data analysis, several major themes emerged in the participants' responses. These themes provide a unique insight into the complicated role of a graduate student; however, they are not exhaustive of the issues faced by graduate students as they attempt to balance their personal and professional lives while completing their graduate preparation programs.

The most prevalent theme to emerge during the interviews was the manner in which graduate students choose to prioritize their lives. Most respondents stated that academic responsibilities were their most important priority. Professional responsibilities proved to be the second priority, followed by family and friends. One student commented,

I'd like to be able to say that family is my first priority, but to be honest it's not. ... Class constantly interferes with other things in my life because of the time it requires. Family is really important to me, but right now they're on hold because I have to make it through this.

While some students did identify faith and/or family and friends as their most important priority, the academic component of graduate education consistently emerged as the respondents' top priority.

Another concept that emerged as part of this theme was the idea of opportunity lost. Most, if not all, respondents asserted that they could not

possibly accomplish everything they would like to in their lives and therefore had to constantly choose between competing interests.

The second central theme to emerge from the interviews was the manner in which graduate students attempt to achieve life balance. Relationships and activities outside of the classroom and the profession were the most prevalent steps the graduate student respondents took in order to achieve balance in their personal and professional lives. Due to the amount of time involved with working in a graduate assistantship combined with academic requirements and activities, many students found it necessary to engage in activities that allowed them to escape completely from these responsibilities. One student aptly stated,

I try to make sure I hang out with people who don't have a clue what student affairs is. This helps me to make sure my job isn't the sole focus of my life. It really helps me to gain perspective on what's important.

Additionally, involvement in professional organizations played a key role in helping graduate students transition effectively from the classroom and assistantship experience into the world of work. One participant remarked, "I've learned things through professional development that otherwise I wouldn't know. It teaches me things that I do not learn in class or even experience in the office." Many professional organizations within student affairs have developed resources such as mentor programs geared specifically toward the graduate student population, and the majority of the respondents noted that these organizations were very helpful in their development as professionals. One student stated, "Sometimes you just need to find people that are not in the same situation as you that can give you perspective and help support you when problems arise. I have found this type of thing to be invaluable."

In addition to competing interests, many graduate students are also exposed to student affairs professionals who appear to forego life balance in order to devote an inordinate amount of time to work and career. As one student mentioned,

It is not that I think my supervisor is a bad professional or anything, it is just the opposite. I think he is awesome. But when I see him in his office at nine or ten at night. ... Well, it just makes me think that maybe he has given too much of himself to this job. His life is not totally his anymore.

Although these professionals show an incredible commitment and love for their work, they may not always be role models for healthy behaviors to the graduate students within their departments. Because these professionals serve in both mentoring and supervisory roles, it is easy to see how graduate students feel pressured to model this behavior.

The final theme to emerge from the personal interviews was the issue of what balance means to graduate students in student affairs and higher education administration preparation programs. When participants were asked whether they thought they had achieved balance in their lives, most participants concluded that they were indeed balanced; however, they also felt that their friends would not likely reach the same conclusion if asked about their lives. A common thread among the participants was a skewed vision of their own balance. Essentially, they were aware that the life they lived would not normally be associated with a balanced existence. Participants knew that balance was something to strive for, and something they desperately wanted to attain, but they also admitted they had not successfully achieved this ideal.

Graduate students are continually told by colleagues and professionals that they need to find balance in their lives if they are to survive in the field of student affairs, but balance is an elusive, loosely defined concept that differs for each and every individual. Graduate student participants readily sacrificed behaviors others might deem necessary and healthy to accomplish academic and professional assignments and have adequate personal time. One such student stated, "I am balanced, but I sacrifice sleep. I definitely sleep fewer hours than I should, but in order to get to the personal stuff to get the balance, I've made the decision to do that." For this graduate student, sleep was a necessary sacrifice in order to accomplish the tasks required for balance.

Implications for Practice

It is clear from the results of this study that graduate students in these student affairs preparation programs often make sacrifices in order to achieve what they deem a balanced lifestyle. Furthermore, the results show that graduate students can feel torn by competing interests and responsibilities and need to escape the realm of higher education by associating with people or in activities completely outside of the profession in order to re-energize. One student stated,

I'm not balanced, no way. I'm constantly running around with my head cut off from one place to another. I don't think this profession really lends itself to being balanced. You have to give so much of yourself to be successful and sometimes that really doesn't leave a lot for you personally.

These results are compelling, given the historical struggle with balance in the student affairs profession. In order to feel like a success, graduate students may decide to sacrifice what they deem most important in their lives before even beginning work in a professional position. The nature of these sacrifices may lead to professional burnout, which, in turn, may contribute to poor retention rates among entry-level student affairs professionals.

Additionally, graduate students in student affairs often serve as role models and mentors for the undergraduate students with whom they work. Like their supervisors, it is important that graduate students model healthy behaviors to their students in order to encourage their students to develop life balance. This modeling is also important for the future of the profession, for undergraduate student leaders may be discouraged from pursuing a career in student affairs based on their observations of the graduate student experience.

Because of the implications of graduate students' concept of balance, it is critical for both faculty in graduate preparation programs and supervisors of graduate assistants to recognize this potential problem for their students and address its importance on a continual basis. Assistantship supervisors and faculty members should collaborate in order to create a graduate experience that allows students to gain both the academic knowledge and practical experiences necessary to begin a successful career in the field. These teachers and mentors should also set expectations for their students that allow them to retain the critical components of a healthy personal life. One student noted,

I think something I have especially learned this year is that in order to have balance you have to have time for yourself. I've had some days when I know that I have something that really needs to be done, and I just stop and recognize that my mental and personal well-being is more important.

Although most, if not all, student affairs professionals recognize the importance and necessity of life and role balance, even the most seasoned professionals can find this ideal difficult to attain. The unhealthy balance of multiple and/or conflicting roles such as student and professional, in addition to other life roles such as partner, parent, family member, or friend can create stress and conflict possibly causing a detriment to each and every role. Because graduate students are the future of the profession and interact closely with undergraduate students on a daily basis, it is essential for them to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to role model healthy behaviors for their students and recognize the importance of adopting such healthy life behaviors for their own benefit.

References

- Barratt, W. (2004). Selecting a student affairs graduate program. *American College Personnel Association Professional Preparation*. Retrieved July 7, 2004, from <http://wbarratt.indstate.edu/documents/selectingshort.htm>
- Baruch, G. K., & Barnett, R. C. (1987). Role quality, multiple role involvement, and psychological well-being in midlife women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 578-585.

- Cooper, D. L., & Saunders, S. A. (2003). Supervising student affairs internships: A special case. In S. Janosik (Ed.), *Supervising new professionals in student affairs* (pp. 175-204). New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Cooke, D. K., Sims R. L., & Peyrefitte, J. (1995). The relationship between graduate student attitudes and attrition. *The Journal of Psychology*, 129, 677-688.
- Coomes, M. D., & Gerda J. J. (2003). Directory of graduate programs preparing student affairs professionals. Retrieved January 3, 2005, from <http://www.acpa.nche.edu/c12/directory.htm>
- Diekow, L. C. (2004, March 9). Balancing all of one's life. *NASPA's NetResults*. Retrieved July 7, 2004, from <http://www.naspa.org/membership/mem/nr/article.cfm?id=1335>
- Dunn, M. (2002). Settling into a life outside of work. In J. Conneely (Ed.), *Planning a life outside of college* (pp. 119-131). Columbus, OH: Association of College and University Housing Officers-International.
- Dunn, T. P., & Dunn, S. L. (1997). The graduate assistant coach: Role conflicts in the making. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 20, 260-272.
- Hamrick, F., Evans, N., & Schuh, J. (2002). *Foundations of student affairs practice: How philosophy, theory, and research strengthen educational outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hansen, L. S. (1997). *Integrative life planning: Critical tasks for career development and changing life patterns*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuther, L. (2003). Teaching the teacher: Ethical issues in graduate student teaching. *College Student Journal*, 37, 219-224.
- Lindberg, R. E. (1995). Seeking the elusive balance. *Association Management*, 47(1), L86-L88.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Poock, M. (2001). A model for integrating professional development in graduate education. *College Student Journal*, 35, 345-353.
- Toma, J. D., Clark, C., & Jacobs, B. (1998). Reconciling the professional and personal for the new student affairs professional. In M. Amey & L. M. Reesor (Eds.), *Beginning your journey: A guide for new professionals in student affairs* (pp. 67-85). Washington D.C.: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Turman, P. (2001). Central state outstanding researching award winners: Learn to play the game: Recommendations for being successful as a graduate teaching assistant. *Communication Studies*, 52(4), 266-271.
- Winston, R. B., & Creamer, D. G. (2002, September 12). Improving staff practices: Part 2 – Supervision. *NASPA's NetResults*. Retrieved July 7, 2004, from <http://www.naspa.org/membership/mem/nr/article.cfm?id=731>