

When You Die, Your Inbox Will Be Full

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I began to be thoughtful about the concept of balance about 10 years ago. I had finished my doctorate (completing my dissertation at Ohio State University while working as Director of Housing and Residence Life at Mississippi State University), was serving as editor of the *SEAHO Report*, and I was serving on the ACUHO-I Board. My father had recently died after a year-long struggle with prostate cancer, which was diagnosed shortly before he was scheduled to retire. My migraines, which I have had occasionally since I was 16, had become more frequent and more intense.

During Resident Assistant Workshop that year, the person scheduled to present the Wellness session had to cancel at the last minute. I stepped in and led the session. Students drew their current wellness wheel, demonstrating the relative percentage of time spent in intellectual, professional, emotional, spiritual, social, and physical realms. It was an “aha” moment for me when my wheel was about 75% professional. This realization, coupled with the diaries I was keeping to track my headaches, led me to resign from the ACUHO-I Board. Resigning was a difficult decision because the people were great, and it was good for my institution, but when I realized that it took me out of town 20 days a year, I decided it was one thing I could let go of in my attempt to regain some personal time.

Shortly thereafter, I attended a program at a regional housing conference. In this presentation two young female professionals made the statement that it was not possible for women to move “up the ladder” without sacrificing their personal lives. They made this statement because they did not know any women department heads with husbands and children. I was intrigued and troubled by that statement for two reasons: (a) I knew plenty of women in student affairs leadership roles who had husbands and children, and (b) by defining “personal life” as only husbands and children, these young women were creating a narrow, potentially unattainable image of happiness for themselves.

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I started a conversation with several women friends in the profession. These friends had diverse professional experiences, histories, and personal lives. Our conversations led to a conference program (McClellan, Goree, McClellan, & Richardson, 1995). We surveyed women faculty, department heads, and senior administrators and asked them how they would advise young professionals struggling with personal and professional balance. Five themes emerged: (a) take care of yourself; (b) nurture your personal life; (c) plan, prepare, organize; (d) you can't do it all; and (e) maintain perspective. Two sub-themes also appeared in several of the themes: (a) some things are worth paying for, and (b) honor your spirituality.

Our presentation was packed with young women grateful to hear the topic discussed, and it was one of the most successful programs I have ever presented. Our conversations continued after the conference, and eventually this topic grew into a line of research and presentations for me. In fact, we updated the original presentation (McClellan, Smith, Turrentine, Dunn, & Skelton, 2001). The themes remained consistent, with "honor your spirituality" receiving more emphasis (possibly because the survey was conducted shortly after 9-11), and the addition of a sub-theme, "role-model balance for students and young staff."

Tony Cawthon and I eventually incorporated the work on balance into several career and life-planning workshops for student affairs professionals, and this journal is a direct outgrowth of those conversations. One trend I have observed in conducting both presentations and serving as program chair for 2003 SACSA conference is the increase in men asking the questions about balance. Early in my career this topic seemed to have been a conversation topic primarily among women.

One reason I maintain this line of research is because it helps keep me focused as it regularly requires me to re-visit the topic of balance in my personal life. I believe that achieving balance is a journey, rather than a destination, and that strategies must change as people's lives change. The personal perspective that I can add to the conversation is that of a single woman, a perspective that is sometimes difficult to find in the literature. Below are a few of my own observations. It is my hope that these comments will inspire some more thoughts and conversations among others.

Finding Balance as a Single Person: Advantages and Disadvantages

1. Because I do not have a husband, partner or children, my "personal life" does not automatically pull me away from my job, so it is easy for the job to take over. It could be easy for my professional identity to become my whole

identity. Because there is no one expecting me to be home at a certain hour, it is easy to remain at my desk. Friends who have gotten married later in life report that, despite the new pressures of a spouse's demands, it creates some nice boundaries around work.

2. The motivation to find balance has to come completely from inside. There is no one else demanding or encouraging me to find balance, and no one for whom I need to remain healthy.

3. There are some stresses which are unique to being single. If the car is to be serviced, the roof to be repaired, the taxes to be prepared, the Christmas tree to be put up, or the retirement to be saved for, it is my sole responsibility. Also, one problem with becoming successful at being independent is you can get too good at it. Remembering to ask for and accept help, and allowing people into our personal worlds may be the ultimate challenge for single professionals.

4. There are fewer natural segues into an out-of-work life. When moving to a new place, people often make social connections through their spouses/partners or the parents of their children's friends. For me, I have to make those connections on my own. Building a life outside work is a bit intimidating, for if I go into a social situation, a ball game, a church event, or a civic event, I attend alone. At times, it feels a bit like being eternally stuck in the first day of junior high, walking in and wondering if anybody will like me.

5. There are, of course, advantages in seeking balance as a single person: I can usually choose to put my needs first. I have to deal with stresses of fewer people. I can make life and career decisions without regard to anyone else's life (although, as an ENFP, that can feel a bit intimidating at times, and it means I cannot blame bad decisions or lack of decisions on anyone else!)

Lessons Learned

Having participated in conversations and reflections on balance for more than a decade, what have I learned? Mostly, I have learned that balance does not happen by accident: I have to make it a priority and be intentional in my efforts. The following are my lessons learned:

1. I have a two-fold motivation for paying attention to balance. Short-term, I am a much more effective professional when I follow Stephen Covey's advice and take time to "sharpen the saw." Long-term, I need to do everything I can now to be sure I am healthy as I age. Since I cannot depend on someone else to take care of me, I must accept that responsibility. This reality has resulted in my becoming more intentional about taking care of both my physical and financial health, neither of which comes easily to me.

2. I am more careful about my job choices. When I interviewed for my current position, I spent as much time considering the personality and work style of the president and other vice presidents as I did the job responsibilities themselves. I actively looked for a location that would allow me to develop a non-work life. This position works for me because it is close to extended family and old friends and in a location with the advantages of both a small town and big city.

3. I try to role-model balance for staff and am considerate of staff with differing personal needs. People sometimes stereotype single women professionals as being married to their jobs. To negate this stereotype, it is important that I actively demonstrate that I have a life outside of work and to clearly state to staff that I understand their family needs and expectations. I accidentally discovered how powerful this message can be when I took my current job. Prior to starting my position, I had made a commitment to take a 10-day trip with my mother (very unusual since I seldom take long vacations). This trip was scheduled for three months after this job began. Before I arrived, I made sure the secretaries in my new office had my trip on the calendar as they were scheduling meetings. By the time I arrived for work, the message had already circulated throughout the division that I understood the importance of vacations and family commitments.

4. While I love my work (most of the time), I try and remember it is what I do, not who I am. Along with some friends, I have catered the wedding receptions of several friends. We joke about it being our escape valve in that when we have had enough of higher education, we will become caterers. In reality, it is nice to know that I could support myself doing something else if necessary. This feeling frees me to make better decisions about work and life.

5. I no longer worry about balance, which is an elusive concept for me. My goal has become much broader and more fluid, and I now focus more on having a life that is fulfilling and rich. After accepting my current position, I asked for advice from a more experienced colleague who had observed me as an interim vice president for a year. He said that I did not look like I was having enough fun, and he suggested that I remember that I asked for this job, so I should enjoy what I had asked for. This has been excellent advice. I can choose to enjoy what I do, to not enjoy what I do, or to do something else. It is really up to me.

6. I am as intentional about scheduling personal time as professional time. I have regular dates with friends and family for shopping, lunch, and events. I even occasionally leave work when a spontaneous opportunity to play presents itself. The untimely deaths of friends, family, and colleagues have helped me realize that “someday” may never come, so I do not need to put off doing all

the important or fun things until after I retire. A favorite email signature line is “when you die your inbox will be full.” I work long hours during the week, but I try to turn off work on weekends and holidays unless I have a specific campus commitment. I have a personal policy to not check email on weekends or holidays unless the president specifically asks me to because of an emergency or pending deadline.

7. Each of us has to discover and honor our own limits. I have chosen to limit my professional involvement primarily to regional rather than national associations. I am generally involved in no more than two local community service organizations at a time. I keep my community service focused on non-students so it does not feel like an extension of work. My favorite saying from the two surveys we did is “HALT – Never let yourself get too Hungry, too Angry, too Lonely, or too Tired.” Those are good words to live by. Because of this philosophy or because of age, I am happy to report that the migraines that originally inspired my quest have almost disappeared.

References

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