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## Is Balance A Myth?



### Is Balance A Myth?

I always receive lots of e-mail after last week's Monday Motivator: **Stop Talking, Start Walking!** Most people express some version of the same sentiment: *I'm overwhelmed. I don't have time to write because of other commitments. I'm falling behind. I can't keep up. I feel guilty, frustrated, angry and/or resentful because I'm working all the time but I'm not moving forward on my writing.* I hear you, and I sympathize with you. I've been there myself, and it was miserable. I also want to encourage you to consider the fact that you make many choices each day, and it's the choices you make about how to spend your time that will mitigate some of these negative feelings. So this week, I want to go a step further by sharing a few thoughts on the idea of "balance."

It seems to me that there is a core challenge that faculty members face: certain aspects of our work have built-in, daily accountability while other aspects of our work have no short-term accountability. For example, teaching has high built-in, daily accountability. You have to go to a classroom where people are waiting for you to teach them something. There are office hours to attend, exams and papers to grade, etc. If you don't show up, teach, grade, and advise there are immediate consequences. The same could be said of clinical duties, administrative responsibilities, and almost all service activities. They have specific times, locations, deadlines, others waiting for us to get the work done, and consequences if we don't. However, our writing and our personal health have no built-in, daily accountability. We promise ourselves that we will finish the article draft, revise that R&R, or go for a run, but then we don't do those things. And when we don't, nothing happens because nobody is waiting for us to do them. So we keep pushing them off while we tend to all of the seemingly urgent tasks du jour.

This core challenge is what leads many pre-tenure and post-tenure faculty members to feel like they lack balance. In other words, the work of the university gets done (because of the built-in accountability mechanisms), but the work of YOU keeps getting pushed back to the weekends, scheduled breaks, and summers. This pattern of binge-writing on breaks and minimizing your needs can quickly lead to the feeling that you're working all the time but squeezing the truly important things (like your writing, your relationships, and your health) into peripheral moments.

What would happen if we shifted our thinking by acknowledging that: a) there will always be more work to do than time to do it, b) the amount of work increases as you move up the academic ladder, and c) prioritizing the seemingly urgent tasks at the expense of the activities that lead to long-term health and success will NOT lead to balance? I believe that facing that reality head-on is deeply empowering! Why? Because it allows you to release

yourself from the false belief that if you just work longer and harder, you will eventually get everything done. Instead, it enables you to shift your energy towards identifying your personal and professional priorities, aligning your time and your priorities, and working as efficiently and productively as possible within a 40-hour work week.

The good news is that balance is possible! It just requires you to recognize the core challenge and create accountability structures for your writing and your personal health. Doing so will fundamentally change the structure of your week because when you prioritize your writing and well-being, interesting things start to happen. Specifically, you will start seeing clearly the areas of work where you may currently be over-functioning, and you will get extraordinarily creative about how to compress the time you are spending in low priority areas. In short, you'll start mastering the skills that allow people to truly thrive in the Academy.

## **Five Steps to Realistic Balance**

While it's great to know that balance is possible, what can you do TODAY to start better managing your heavy workload and make sure your core needs are getting met?

### **1. Sharpen Your Focus**

The more you have going on in your life off-campus, the sharper your focus must be during the time you spend on-campus. If you have limited time each day, make sure a significant amount of that time is spent on activities (such as research and writing) that contribute to your long-term success as a scholar. Likewise, if you find yourself working long hours and having little time for anything else, make sure that the things that are important to your relationships and your health receive attention.

### **2. Stop Thinking You Are Selfish**

I often hear tenure-track faculty (especially women) describe the act of setting aside time for writing every day as "selfish." These same people describe long days of putting everyone else's needs first and "hoping" they will have the time and energy to write at the end of the day. If you're in a similar situation, release yourself from the idea that taking care of your own needs (not to mention making time to tend to the primary criteria in your promotion and/or tenure decision) is "selfish." It is not selfish to prioritize your writing. In fact, it's your job.

### **3. Identify ONE Problem Area That You Need To Resolve In Order To Be More Productive**

This week, try to identify the primary problem standing in the way of your productivity. If there are lots of them, then pick the biggest one. If you need some help identifying your problem, take a look back at the list entitled "[What's Holding You Back?](#)" If you still can't figure it out, try talking with one of your mentors and/or check in with others in the [NCFDD Discussion Forum](#).

### **4. Take One Small Step Forward To Make A Change**

Whatever problem you identify, come up with one concrete step forward you can take to resolve it this week. It doesn't matter how small that step is, just figure it out and commit to it. Maybe this is the week you are going to start writing every day for 30 minutes, saying "no" to any additional service requests for a month, developing a rubric instead of giving in-depth written comments, delegating non-essential tasks to someone else, and/or hiring someone to do your taxes, clean your house, or shovel your snow. Making just one concrete change will create positive momentum, help you to begin surfacing the deeper problems, and motivate you to take another step forward next week.

### **5. Be Gentle, Loving, And Patient With Yourself**

Learning to manage your workload and maximize your productivity takes time. Several years ago, I decided I was going to start running for exercise and stress reduction. At first, all I could do was walk around the track while other people flew by me. I told myself, "Don't compare yourself. You're just getting started, and you're doing the best you can for right now." After two weeks of walking the track, I was power-walking so fast that I passed several slow joggers, and it occurred to me: "I can do that!" Each week I jogged one lap further than the previous week, and before I knew it, I could run three miles, three days a week.

I could tell the exact same story about learning to work efficiently. When I finally understood that I could no longer physically work 80 hours a week, I started to make the changes that my mentors suggested. Once again, I told myself, "Don't compare yourself. You're just getting started, and you're doing the best you can for right now." I took small steps forward, one week at a time, and pretty soon I was writing every morning, completing drafts, publishing my research, and feeling confident. I wasn't perfectly balanced, but I was confident that I could publish and flourish without sacrificing my health, relationships, and sanity. And that was a good start.

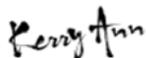
## The Weekly Challenge

This week I challenge you to:

- Acknowledge that there will always be more work to do than time to do it.
- Release yourself from whatever negative self-judgments and criticism are keeping you from aligning your time with your priorities.
- If you're unhappy with your productivity, gently ask yourself, **what's holding me back?**
- Identify one CONCRETE step forward, and commit to executing that change this week.
- If you need support in making writing a daily priority, consider joining one of the **Writing Challenges** in the NCFDD Discussion Forum.
- If you haven't created a **Strategic Plan** for the term yet, it's not too late!
- If you want to learn the skill of **aligning your time and priorities** each week, sign up for our next core curriculum webinar today.

I hope this week brings each of you a sense of clarity about the structural origin of your time pressures, a spirit of gentleness towards yourself as you navigate difficult terrain, endless creativity in designing your own solutions, and the feeling of empowerment that comes from moving forward.

Peace and Productivity,



Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

President, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity

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