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Work–Life Integration

Strategies and Tactics for Achieving Work–Life Integration as a Junior Faculty Member

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Introduction

During my first week as an independent researcher, Prof. Sam Danishefsky, my postdoctoral advisor told me: “You’re creative and have bravado, so don’t worry about tenure. Any amount of time that you spend worrying about job security is time spent not advancing your chemistry.” This advice was timely as my initial vision of life on the tenure track was a complete unknown. From the very first days I felt entrapped, frustrated, and obsessed with the low moments. Even during the good times—the revise-and-resubmit decision on a manuscript, the notice of award for a grant, or a student’s PhD defense—I found myself battling with the mental tangles of effort, time, and self-worth.

It wasn’t until I began seeing a counselor to cope with these struggles that I realized the concept of “work–life balance” isn’t conducive to my career. Personally, I find it difficult to turn off significant portions of my life to focus singularly on one area. Thus, any attempts to have “work–life balance” as defined by popular culture (life’s demands having equal but separated focus), would be challenging. Whether I’m teaching undergraduate organic chemistry or walking my dog (a 12-year-old Maltese), I don’t complete tasks with uniformity of thought. Thus, to overcome the anguish resulting from my lack of balance, I needed to adopt a different philosophy: work–life integration.

Under this philosophy, life is a puzzle featuring segments of different sizes that are integrated to obtain a complete picture. Some segments require more attention than others. The challenge is the picture constantly changes which makes achieving balance difficult. Ultimately, I found success by understanding that it’s okay to spend more time on some aspects of my life than others and that the division of time would always change. Moreover, I learned to identify issues that could trigger stress or unhappiness—my root causes of imbalance. The key to success was a consistent life assessment.

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In this scientific voice communication, I aim to provide, through the lens of my own life, a strategy to assess life priorities, work priorities, and issues that cause imbalance (sections 1–3). Within each section I’ll identify challenges that were reoccurring through the pre-tenure period and provide my strategy for engaging the topic.

Assessing My Life Priorities

1. Family

The last time I saw my father I was 10 years old. It was during my paternal grandmother’s funeral. While I harbor no ill will for having an absentee parent, I dreamt of being the father I didn’t have. Fast forward 27 years and I’m now the father of two daughters, Allyson and Angela, ages 6 and 1, respectively. I’m also a husband and the oldest of five siblings. I’ve never struggled with prioritizing my family. What was not easy, however, was balancing the roles of father, husband, brother, and independent researcher. After clearly defining my priorities, I realized that I didn’t have to sacrifice any moments with my family to succeed at work. When it comes to raising children, or being a good partner, the first priority is being present. I miss a good number of seminars if they begin at the end of the day because I corral my daughters from school at 3pm. Likewise, my kids end up spending time with me in my office and on campus when appointments collide. Books, empty boxes, tape, and marker pens bring children lots of joy and will buy you a few hours of peace and quiet.

2. Physical and mental health

Father-time waits for no man. I exercise every day, use a standing desk, and try to limit sitting to meetings. I take a five-minute walk up and down the stairs of the chemistry building every hour. I watch what I eat and go to the physician each year. It is very important to pay attention to your physical and mental health. Once you have a family and a large lab of trainees, you quickly realize how many people are dependent on you.

To maintain my mental health, I have several hobbies. I garden and compost, and most people know about my bonsai collection. I also read a psychological thriller novel every week. I also have an obsession with Memphis-style barbeque—I have a competition-style smoker!

3. Watch your hours and non-chemistry activities

As a first-year graduate student, My PhD mentor told me to “Take one day every week to do something that is not related to chemistry and make that a priority in the early phase of your career.” I interpreted that advice from Prof. Sulikowski to mean that it’s okay to say no to the hyper-masculine culture that mocks those who leave work in the early evening and considers an 80-hour week a badge of honor. I drop my children off at school at 7 am. I exercise until 8 and start work at 8:30. I pick my children up at 3 pm. In the evening I’ll do some additional reading and writing. I can complete my work in confined spaces of time because I learned quickly how to say no (see below) and minimize wasting time.

4. Be yourself

Unlike the humanities and social sciences, there are very few black faculty members in the chemical sciences. In fact, when I attend a conference or visit another university, I’m pleasantly surprised when I’m not the only brown face. I mention this story because when you are clearly the “other” person in the room it is difficult to picture what’s needed to thrive. I also felt, for the first time in my life, that by being the only brown person in the room that I would eventually lose my culture through osmosis!

To ensure my cultural well-being I created a support system. It’s easy to feel isolated. The fact is, I have to make an effort to connect with other similarly situated African Americans to build a community that isn’t readily available in chemistry. Second, create and nurture the environment you need. Diversity and inclusion are not just buzzwords. There are companies that have an interest in not only recruiting candidates of color, but also creating work environments in which people of different backgrounds are wanted and included. Third, embrace similarities, not differences. Being the black person in the room means that I stand out. Instead of focusing on being alone, find the similarities that exist with your colleagues. Finally, understand when to speak up and when to be quiet. Make sure your voice is heard, but also make sure that you aren’t drafted to be the spokesman for an entire group.

Assessing My Work Priorities

1. Set plans and have goals for each day

I enjoy thinking back to what helped me succeed as a trainee. I’ve succeeded, in part, by duplicating that behavior as a professional. As a senior graduate student and postdoc, I worked with purpose—running three reactions per day. I tried to plan reactions around three days in advance. I take a similar approach now by rigorously scheduling my reading and writing—activities which consume 85% of my time.

2. Make use of the flexibility

I once joked to the graduate students in lab that I can’t do work at work. Previously, when I needed to read or write, I

would work in the library or in a different building. Early in my career, students would find me working in different places across campus. Like most, I need some level of privacy to work. Unfortunately, I have a hard time working with my door closed—its lonely and suffocating. However, if the door is open visitors will come! I addressed this challenge by adopting the famous E.J. Corey traffic light, which allows me to work in my office with the door open while minimizing disturbances.

3. Travel

Travel requests are never ending. As a general rule, I limit travel to one trip per month except for extraordinary circumstances. The community is very supportive. Colleagues will work with you if you can’t accept their initial invitation—we all have conflicts. In addition to scheduling, be aware of the physical toll that traveling takes on your body and the mental toll traveling can place on your mind. A senior colleague gave me a great travel tip. When traveling by air or rail, select a seat that allows your dominant hand to be near the aisle—it makes it much easier to write when your arm isn’t bumping someone.

4. Say no/say yes

Learn to decline requests. There’s no retaliation—no one remembers anyway! Just don’t always say no. I try to be selective with how I commit my time. I avoid most service activities that don’t concern one of three topics that I care deeply about: i) enhancing opportunities for ethnic minorities and women in science; ii) my own research program; iii) undergraduate education.

5. Graduate students and your research program

Students are creative and work hard. I realized early on that as much as they needed me to help them become the best versions of themselves, I also needed them, much for the same reason. Help goes beyond completing their research projects. I need seasoned students to train junior students and make sure the lab maintains order and doesn’t lose knowledge. If American football can serve as the analogy, I view myself as the head coach. The graduate students, however, are the offensive and defensive coordinators. While it is difficult as a junior student, senior students must call plays for their projects. Senior students must develop the ability to solve problems. Just as I help students fine-tune their ideas, it’s important that they do the same for me. In my offer letter from Prof. Danishefsky, he explicitly stated that the most important part of the training experience was open discourse. He would critique the quality of my ideas and he expected the same in return.

During my time as a postdoc, I also learned the importance of having students assist with writing papers, proofreading proposals, and organizing references. This is a critical part of their training and students are particularly good at assisting with compiling background information for projects. In many

cases, they can articulate why a problem is important and innovative better than I can! While the level of polish will vary depending on the student and their level of experience, I find that students try their hardest to help me innovate.

Assessing the Root Causes of Imbalance

1. Working with undergraduates

In the professoriate, our challenges are wide-ranging and are accompanied by unforeseen issues. For example, increasing student enrollment leads to larger course sizes and an increased demand for undergraduate research slots. I've calculated that for the 3 hours per week that I meet with students in the classroom, I spend 15 hours outside of the classroom in preparation, organization, and meetings. This total does not include administrative work (writing assignments, making copies, and grading). This total also doesn't include the time that graduate students spend working with their junior colleagues. While working with undergraduates is an enjoyable perk, it is also time-consuming. Accordingly, it is important to make sure that undergraduates clearly understand your availability. The goal is to minimize the entertaining, yet time-consuming, unannounced visits.

2. Grants

In the west, there has been a decline in public funding for colleges and universities. Obtaining grant support is more competitive now than ever before. The application process in and of itself is arduous. I've received a lot of advice about proposals, the most important tip being to "start in advance". I'm a bit paranoid and work on the extreme side of timelines. I start proposals about 9 months in advance. My logic is that it gives me time to work casually but purposefully over a long period of time. After working for 3 months, I ask senior colleagues to proofread what is at the time a reasonable draft. Everyone will help you when you give them 2–3 months to get back to you! The second piece of advice is to get your eyes on grant proposals. A senior faculty member in our department organized a portfolio of successful and unsuccessful grants. You can also sit on study section or panels to gain an understanding of how proposals are judged.

3. Don't crowd-source your self-esteem

Understanding technological stressors is now key to human health and wellness. I don't use social media as it seems staged and stressful. It also appears to be a medium to crowd-source your self-esteem. I'd argue that just by existing, we all have value. Don't give anonymous people on the web the ability to take that away from you. Likes and follows need not be a variable in determining your self-worth.

4. Email

I check email twice per day. Think about it; if you spend 2–3 minutes responding to every email you receive, you probably

lost 2–3 hours. No email is so important that it requires an immediate response. If the email is critical, it should be a phone call or an office visit.

5. Identify big time-burners

I've been told by several senior colleagues that 95% of meetings should be an email. While there can be social implications to attending or missing meetings, I would urge any young professional to commit to protecting your time. Facetime burns time.

6. Child and elder care

Aging is a fact of life that affects all of us. I've only recently comprehended the extent to which aging affects my mom (and my in-laws) and how it will affect me. Although they are seniors and still live independently, it is clear that the time will come when the effects of aging become more evident and long-term care is needed. Indeed, several recent crises (cancer survival and coping with early stage dementia) have made elder care my new reality. The more aware we are of how aging can affect our relatives, and what options are available to them as seniors and us as adult child caretakers, the better for all parties.

I wish I had advice or a game-plan for children. My mom told me "you create them, you figure them out". The best advice I have is to integrate your children into your professional life as much as you can—as much as they'll allow. For the time being, my children get very excited when they come on campus. They enjoy the scenery and being around "the big kids". The big kids enjoy it as well.

Conclusions

In my experience, successfully integrating work and life comes down to a strategy that my grandfather taught me 25 years ago. Triage, Address, Delegate, Stall. Regardless of their origin (personal vs. work), requests for your time will be abundant. So, you must figure out which requests are critical. While you can honor some requests, others will be triaged. Some requests will be urgent but won't require your attention—they can be handled by a graduate student or a postdoc. Finally, identify requests that can be postponed until a later date.

In addition to understanding when and where to address challenges, work–life integration is readily accomplished when you clearly identify synergies between all aspects of your life and understand how to piece them together. Learn to pivot between different areas of your life, rather than attempting to put up hard boundaries that are difficult to maintain.

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