

# Work-Life Balance in the Neoliberal University<sup>1</sup>

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Conversations about striking an appropriate work-life balance for faculty in academia have acquired considerable traction in the last decade or so. Many qualitative and quantitative studies that investigate this equation focus on causes for why university professors experience an increased difficulty in integrating their personal and professional lives. Most notably, these causes are traced back to changes in policy and social status of higher education; shift in the demographic of students enrolling in universities, which requires a lot more time spent mentoring a diverse student body; the pressure on faculty to keep pace with rapid technological advances; the “publish or perish” imperative; a reduction of administrative support and an escalation in the administrative responsibilities that professors have to fulfill; lack of job security, promotion opportunities, or support from colleagues and superiors (Sliskovic and Sersic 2011; Thorsen 1996; Winefield et al. 2003; Kinman and Jones 2008). These are just some of the factors that contribute to a generalized sense of anxiety that many faculty, across disciplines, universities, and even countries, have acknowledged as the leading reasons for why their work hours take over their evenings and weekends, resulting in a compromised sense of well-being.

The second most dominant body of scholarship regarding academic work-life balance is invested in offering strategies for attaining this desired goal. This solution oriented research posits and encourages strategies whereby faculty can learn to juggle their competing duties by learning to “say no” to tasks that detract from their primary responsibilities; choosing to delegate (the advice given by University of Oregon’s Holden Leadership Center); advance planning and time management and having clarity about tenure procedures and the rules that effect their job. In addition, may be about focusing on the pleasure of their labor; reconfiguring their cognitive responses to the challenges they encounter at work; avoiding the guilt and shame of unproductivity; and by deliberately factoring in leisure and personal time, incorporating exercise, focusing on emotional and physical health etc. – what has, in common parlance, come to be known as “me-time” – into their schedules (Owens et al; Drexel University’s Office of Faculty Affairs).

In this short essay, which has emerged out of the comments that I made at a Butler Center roundtable on “Work-Life Balance,” I adopt a slightly different approach. My goal here is neither to add to the array of causes that contribute to faculty burnout nor offer practical strategies for fending off the burnout. Instead, I pose three theoretical and philosophical

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questions that might help us reconfigure the work-life equation, even as we begin to comprehend the ways in which our intersectional identities under a neoliberal academic regime complicate any easy one-stop-shop type of strategizing for solving this surmounting sense of imbalance that pervades the lives of academic faculty.

### **Reconfiguring the Problem or Why the Phrases We Use Matter**

In some ways, the phrase “work-life balance” is itself a function and symptom of the very neoliberal ethic that it hopes to draw attention to and rectify. It is innate to the neoliberal impulse to permeate every facet of our life, to become a central organizing ethic of society that shapes the way we live, think and feel about ourselves, and each other (Brown 2015). The funding cut-backs in higher education alongside the rampant corporatization of universities, which values only market-controlled notions of productivity, are the paramount reasons why increasingly professors find themselves taking their work home. The neoliberal university thus usurps not only work-time labor but also faculty’s time at home; the home functions more and more as an extension of their office-space. In this extended office-space, faculty end up performing a huge chunk of their professional duties like grading, course preparation, research, and catching up on the ever-proliferating backlog of emails, because their time at work is taken over by classroom teaching, office hours, mentoring students, faculty and committee meetings, and other administrative and service responsibilities.

In this regard, the phrase “work-life balance” is a testament precisely to the primacy of faculty work-lives, their laboring selves under neoliberalism. Instead of encouraging us to remember that work is a subset of life, the coinage, by placing “work” before “life,” ironically ends up prioritizing work. In as much as the language we use to understand our problems frames our perception, our affective responses, and our imagination of the solutions we can envisage, “work-life balance” only reinstates/re-inscribes the problem rather than posing a challenge to the imbalance between work and life that most university professors experience. As a counterpoint, and this is something Karen Kelsky and Kel Weinholt (2019) articulate in their discussion of work-life balance, as best practice, we might want to shift to reframing the issue as “life-work balance.”

At the same time, though, both coinages – “work-life” and “life-work” balance – are blind to the fact that for most university professors, their work – teaching, mentoring, and research – is integral to their self-conceptualization and the ways in which they make meaning of their lives. Work, then, is not separate from life, but an integral component of what gives meaning to one’s sense of a rich, fulfilling life. Not only do these phrases continue the neoliberal illusion that work and life are meant to be two discrete realms, and perpetuate the myth that a separation of the two, under the current economic regime, is the ultimate and an achievable goal. They also do not consider the uniqueness of academic labor that entails, more often than not, a disruption of neat boundaries between work and personal labor. The question before us, then, is how we may theorize the overlaps between work time and personal time entailed in the lives of faculty, without making that flexibility subservient to the neoliberal impulse where all aspects of their lives are inadvertently an extension of a marketized doctrine.

### **Considering Non-normative Lives in Discussing Work-Life Balance**

A few months ago, I was complaining to my colleague-friend about feeling increasingly drained – a generalized tirade about things seeming out of sync, feeling over-worked and sleep-deprived. His response produced an important moment of insight. He asked me what, in particular, it was that I found most challenging, and it was in answering his question that I first realized the primary cause of my own disgruntlement – that when I came back home from campus, often after an 8-10 hour workday, it was to an empty apartment. The ritual of cooking and eating dinner alone, of having no human interaction at the end of a long work day was taking a toll, such that even though my work, despite its hectic rhythms, was incredibly rewarding, my overall sense of wellbeing felt tarnished. It was, however, my colleague's rejoinder to my response that added a whole new dimension to my understanding of struggles that academics face. His eyes brightened as I mentioned my empty apartment and my solitary after-work routines at home and said that the idea of a quiet evening sounded blissful. Instead, he had to immediately segue out of his teacher-mode and into his husband and dad mode. We both laughed at the all too obvious "grass is greener on the other side" narrative we had exchanged about our lives, but the moment allowed me to arrive at an important realization.

Invariably, most discussions that highlight the paucity of personal time for university faculty frame the "life" component of the work-life balance equation in terms of family-time. What this means is that our conceptualization of "life" is more often than not hijacked by a normative understanding of how non-work hours are spent or ought to be spent. A truly intersectional conversation about work-life balance, would emphasize not only that people with traditional family situations also need non-familial time to themselves (as in the case of my colleague), but even more importantly, that there are several faculty whose personal lives do not adhere to normative domestic frameworks/living situations in the least.

I have been thinking more and more about what quality of life means for people living in university towns without families and traditional support structures. Single people, especially women, international scholars with their primary family and friends still in their home countries, people in long-distance relationships, queer, fat, disabled faculty often choose or find themselves in living situations that are non-normative. This can be particularly hard in a society that is fixated on romantic partnerships; in which the traditional family unit is the primary model for personal sustenance.

In thinking about work-life balance, then, it is imperative that we begin to consider an intersectional conceptualization of the lives that faculty lead, that we start to comprehend the ways in which some people have access to structures of care, while others struggle much harder to find community and a sense of belonging. While substantial empirical studies exist on the particular challenges that women faculty face (Aguirre 2000, Samble 2008, August 2006), a comprehensive and ethical discussion of work-life balance must take into account the innumerable ways in which gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nationality, and physical capacities of faculty contribute to their ability to integrate their work and personal lives.

### **Working Towards a Work-Life Balance**

It is important to note that the predominant strategies advocated for achieving work-life balance put the onus for addressing and rectifying structural pressures that faculty encounter on

individual faculty themselves. This individualized mode of addressal is part and parcel of the neoliberal shifts in higher education. The neoliberal ethic “encourages people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being” (Larner quoted. in Rottenberg 2014:421) In this new regime of morality, collective forms of action or well-being are eroded, and emphasis is placed on self-reliance, efficiency, and the individual’s capacity to exercise his or her own autonomous choices. These individualized coping mechanisms, however, only bandage over transformations that actually require collective addressal. To lay the responsibility of managing better the innumerable responsibilities that faculty undertake singularly upon their shoulder might seem like an obvious and practical survival technique, whereby faculty must accept their new, neoliberal work conditions and find strategies of resilience within it. However, these individualized strategies only work to play catch-up rather than alter structures that undermine faculty wellbeing.

What structural alterations require, first and foremost, is a reconceptualization of faculty agency in demanding institutional support from higher echelons of university administration. It requires faculty from across disciplines and with different levels of seniority, and – in the long run -- across universities, to advocate collectively for an alternative ethic for assessing faculty productivity and impact. Faculty have to insist on institutional responsibility towards faculty wellbeing, rather than accept the demise of this possibility and finding alternative, entirely self-referential and self-reliant modes of compensating for structural loss.

And finally, faculty must explicitly initiate difficult conversations about who is best placed to make these demands from the university administration. This can only happen in the context of an acknowledgement that vulnerability is differentially distributed among faculty. Un-tenured faculty, faculty of color, international faculty occupy a far more tenuous position in the academy compared to tenured faculty from majority racial and ethnic groups, who may thus be best placed to spearhead these demands. This may seem like a daunting task, of imagining the impossible. And yet, beginning with ensuring the security of culturally and racially minoritized, pre-tenure and contractual faculty, can go a long way in moving towards enhancing work-life balance. When those most precariously placed in the university are granted dignity, agency, autonomy and security, it establishes a work culture that is interculturally sensitive, and promotes an academic environment that is attuned to the work conditions in which everyone thrives – both in their professional and personal capacities.

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