

ACADEMIC Leader



Exploring Work-Work Balance and the Academic Department Chair

Rebecca Pope-Ruark • February 6, 2023

One refrain I hear repeatedly from the faculty and leaders I work with via coaching, workshops, and virtual retreats is that there is simply too much work for one person to ever realistically complete. Junior professors struggle with how much time to give to teaching new classes and managing students for the first time and setting up research activities crucial to their promotion. Clinical educators juggle not only the traditional teaching, research, and service but also responsibilities to patients. Department chairs wonder how they will ever go up for full professor when their administrative and service duties take away

any and all time for even thinking about research. Throw in a pandemic, and even more work arises under even more difficult conditions.

How do we as faculty, and especially as leaders such as department chairs, have time to think and focus on our most meaningful work, whatever that might be, in the face of so many competing yet simultaneous priorities? As I was exploring the literature in search of some answers, I came across a new-to-me idea that deserves more attention: that of *work-work balance*. We're all familiar with the debates around work-life balance, or integration, or fit, or whatever version is popular now, so I won't go into that here. But what exactly is work-work balance, and why should we be talking more about it? This article is a gentle exploration of the term.

In the initial article I found, [Gabrielle Griffin defines work-work balance](#) as “the ways in which workers in higher education seek to balance conflicting *concurrent* work demands made on them” (emphasis in original). In her study of Nordic scholars in the digital humanities, she found that participants were splitting their time among home departments, interdisciplinary DH centers and projects, and the rest of their academic responsibilities in ways that, for the most part, left them all feeling some version of disappointed and disjointed; one participant described not being able to give enough time to each of their functional roles as “short-changing one [responsibility] in favor of another whilst feeling bad about the whole thing.” Griffin found that her participants’ experiences consisted of constant juggling of demands, general overwork, and disheartening compromise. She argues that “those who experience work-work balance issues suffer from a variety of effects, including problems with time management in relation to the multiplicity of their concurrent demands; a lack of a sense of belonging as their distributed work-life fragments across time and space; issues with completing projects, tasks, and jobs which are left undone; and feelings of under-performance.”

It's not the most heartening of investigations, but many of us can likely empathize or relate to the participants and their overwhelm, especially those in similarly interdisciplinary fields or complex leadership roles.

Still interested in this idea of work-work balance, though, I did some more searching and found the term come up in two other academic contexts: as an article on one institution's IT blog and as a piece in a journal for clinical educators. Both look at the idea more positively and proactively than Griffin does. In [his post](#) on the Washington University of St. Louis IT website, Tim Brooks defines and compares life-work and work-work balance, describing the latter as “making sure we have adequate time to get actual work done, and protecting our time for planning and ‘hands-on’ work. Work-work balance should also consider time for professional development, mentoring, coaching and personal productivity.” He offers several tips to readers, including calendar blocking to make regular time for the important work that most easily goes by the wayside, such as personal projects and professional development, planning ahead for professional development commitments, and regularly discussing priorities with a supervisor.

Brooks wasn't writing to an audience of academic leaders or department chairs, but there are some takeaways: the idea of calendar blocking religiously and having a person (he names a supervisor, but it could be a colleague or a mentor) to routinely review your priorities with and help hold you accountable to your goals for all aspects of your work.

Calendaring and scheduling are also major recommendations in the [other article](#) I found, in the *Canadian Medical Education Journal*. The authors report on a conference panel and roundtable discussion about work-work balance for clinical educators (CEs) whose responsibilities often exceed those of non-clinical faculty. The authors break the outcomes of the event into a 4P framework:

- **Prioritize activities** by having a clear understanding of personal mission and career trajectory, which is revised and updated regularly through reflection and mentoring, and being willing to say no to requests and opportunities that do not further those goals.
- **Plan ahead** by block-scheduling protected time for work that is crucial and meaningful—education work in the case of CEs—in a location where one will not be disturbed and where technology use can be limited.
- **Persist with passions**, which are determined through reflection and insight over time, which encourages perseverance on projects that one cares most deeply about and will make time for amid competing responsibilities.
- **Partner with others**, including assistants, mentors, and mentees, to move projects forward and stay in touch with priorities and professional goals.

The authors end by arguing that their framework can be used “to think about how [academics] maintain their functionality, productivity, and passion while they balance the facets of their professional lives.” And that is really the core of this discussion about work-work balance for academic leaders, I think: maintaining functionality, productivity, and passion for the work while juggling everything else that gets thrown in the way—the bureaucracy, the paperwork, the conflict.

What might it look like for a department chair to use the 4P framework in working toward work-work balance? Perhaps regularly reviewing, updating, and referring to a purpose statement that covers the major aspects of their work, however their pie is divided, as a reminder of the reasons the work they do in all aspects of their career is meaningful and aligns with the third P, persisting with passions. We’ve already talked about scheduling, but making and protecting time on your calendar for the work that feeds your mind and for meeting with the people who share that work with you can be important as well. These are possibilities.

Other mentions of work-work balance came up in my searching, most in relation to work-life balance or encouraging freelancers to make time for not only the work that pays the bills but also the work that they aspire to—not bad advice for academics to consider either.

I share my exploration of the concept of work-work balance not because there are easy answers to academic overwhelm, though it’s helpful to take in some of the advice shared by Brooks and the Canadian CE scholars. Instead, I share because it offers a way forward to have open conversations with deans and faculty about the realities of workload, control and autonomy, and administration writ both large and small. If we use Griffin’s definition of work-work balance as “the ways in which workers in higher education seek to balance conflicting *concurrent* work demands made on them,” we open a door for empirical research into how academics and department chairs manage their time, competing priorities, and personal goals. Armed with that knowledge, we can conduct impactful cultural analyses of our workplaces and develop strategies not just for individuals to manage their workloads but for institutional communities to take a hard look at how work is being done and redesign it for more humane approaches.

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