

Question 10:
***How do you balance your teaching life with your life
outside of teaching?***

“This question was one that I avoided at first. The word balance doesn’t always come to mind when I think about work and personal life. Since the introduction of email into our lives, it seems that there are no times that are sacred and separate from work. It doesn’t seem to matter what type of work you do, we are expected to be ‘on call’ 24/7. To complicate matters, I work at a community college. Most days, no matter where I go, I will run into a former or current student . . . a restaurant, a walk on the beach, the post office . . . there they are greeting me. I have found myself advising students at the garden shop, while ordering my meal at a restaurant, and at the vet’s office. So, I didn’t really think I had much balance, as it seems that my job follows me everywhere.

But then, a colleague reminded me of the work that I do outside the college. My volunteer work as a mediator in the court, the local theatre company board that I sit on, the charity work done for the animal shelter in town. All of these things help bring me back into my community and out of the formal life of teaching. I have learned that there needs to be down time. I communicate to my students how frequently I will check email over the weekends and in the evening. I triage the messages. As a colleague once claimed, ‘there are no emergencies in higher ed.’ I carry that as a mantra and ignore those things that can wait until the morning. True student distress I will respond to, but I also make sure to keep the boundaries clear and claim time for myself to recharge. So, I guess there is balance after all.”

Nancy Willets, Cape Cod Community College
2014 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

“Not a problem. I check the job at the door and take it up again when I return. Of course, I regard teaching as a job not as a career, not as saving lives, not as improving lives, not as making a difference in the world, etc. The way I look at it is that I have X amount of information to impart per course, per semester. I plow through it to the best of my ability. I only get bummed if I do not get through the requisite information.”

Joe Ayres, Washington State University
2005 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

“This is a difficult question to answer because so much of who I am is wrapped up in being a teacher. Given the number of hours it takes to prepare to teach and correct, it is no easy task to balance teaching life with outside life. When our children were young, I got up before they woke up to do school work or as soon as they went to bed, I went back to work. I wanted to be completely present in their lives and to be fully committed to being their mother. On the other hand, they have gone to events at the College with me or to classes when they were on vacation and I was not. My husband is also a good sport about going to events at the College. My family knows how important teaching and my students are to me and they support that. On the other hand, if and when I ever feel

that I am not doing a good job with ‘life outside of teaching,’ I would pay attention to that and try to achieve a more equitable balance.”

Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, Regis College

2014 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“I apologize. I cannot answer this question succinctly. My day job is that of a Dean of Arts and Sciences. As a dean, I often deliver faculty development and even dean development sessions on creating balance in one’s work life. Universities will always take more and more from you while giving you less and less. It is really up to you to draw the line. To be sure, if you have a department chair or dean who is a real idiot and prefers you as a workaholic, drawing that line will be harder. But for the sake of your future, you must find a way to do it. Unless I am in a meeting or am attending a function, I leave work promptly at 5:00 p.m. I encourage others to do the same. This does not mean that a faculty member should not be part of the campus community or socialize at work with colleagues. But it is a warning to those faculty who just can’t say no. I have seen too many good people ‘counseled out of tenure’ because they devoted 100% of their lives to service at the expense of their teaching and research agendas. I tackle the big, awful project that makes me really want to procrastinate first. Then I plan for at least 40 distractions. Forty is a good Biblical number, right? A colleague once threw some shade my way in front of my Chief Academic Officer, claiming that she stuck around until the job was done. I responded, without missing a beat, ‘I plan my day so that I am finished with my bigger projects by closing time. I think the CAO would rather have an organized person working for him than a workaholic, right?’ The CAO nodded vigorously. As my former colleague Joe Roidt once said, ‘You will die with email in your inbox.’ He is right.

At the end of the day, go home on time: Do not linger. When the university is on break, take half of it ‘off.’ No one ever has a summer off, but be sure to take a day or two ‘off’ each week of summer break. Use these days ‘off’ to be fully present with your family. Make memories that will last forever. Play. Laugh. Live life. With the remaining break time, spend 50% of it writing your hands off. Write and submit no fewer than two conference papers per year—one for a regional and one for a national conference. Revise the hell out of your conference papers and submit them to journals. Reach out to the big wigs in the field and see if any of them will mentor you. Steven Goldswig, Raymie McKerrow, and the late James McCroskey volunteered to do that for me. With the remaining 50% of your break time, explore ways to improve your teaching. There is no one in our field who is so good that s/he can rest on her/his laurels. Even though I am no longer in the classroom, I am reading about team-based learning and competency-based education. I got certified by Quality Matters to be a program reviewer for online courses and programs. Keep growing. Don’t BS yourself that you’re good enough. Good enough never is.”

Alfred G. Mueller II, Neumann University

2013 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

"I try not to spend too much time preparing for class, so I focus on preparing the day of class if I can. If I prepare too far in advance, I tend to spend a lot more time obsessing over examples, details, theories, etc., without a higher return. I do also not spend hours and hours grading, ever. I assign a lot of writing and a lot of papers, but I also know that to become a good writer, one has to learn to edit and revise their own work. I never edit a student's work for a course assignment; students spend time editing their own and each other's work and revising papers over the course of the semester to improve them. I use a rubric and I write global comments at the end of the paper. I do not give out my cell phone number to students. I focus on the rewarding aspects of teaching rather than the tedious tasks that do not seem to improve student performance. These are practices that have taken me years to learn!"

Stacey K. Sowards, The University of Texas at El Paso
2013 WSCA Distinguished Teaching Award

"As a professor at a campus with several non-traditional students, I am constantly amazed at how they manage to juggle the demands of their family, work and academic lives. But as I reflect on my past 23 years in academe, I realize that they're not the only ones who face challenges in finding balance between their personal and professional lives. A few years ago, I experienced the beginning stages of what many instructors encounter at some point in their teaching career--burnout. After careful reflection, I identified strategies for more effectively managing the multiple demands for my time. First, I needed to establish clearer expectations for communicating with my students. Over the years, I felt more compelled to answer emails I received from students at all hours of the day and evening, as well as on weekends--and it was time-consuming. A new statement was added to my syllabi that explained to students that weekends are reserved for my family. Students are invited to email questions Monday-Friday between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.--after all, they wouldn't expect to find professors in their offices on weekends to answer questions. Next, I established a scheduled block of time in the mornings to devote to grading. I advise my students to create regularly scheduled "study time" but neglected to follow my own advice. Once I had reclaimed my evenings and weekends, I rediscovered the books, hobbies, and other activities that had become overshadowed by teaching demands. It's amazing how such a simple statement on a syllabus and following my own advice could make such a difference in finding balance!"

Candice Thomas-Maddox
2003 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award
