The word “balance” invokes images of giant scales wavering indecisively between two opposing forces or of children on a seesaw bouncing up and down—one hoping that the other won’t abandon ship leaving the unlucky one to slam into the ground. Balance in graduate school may seem impossible. But with effort, planning, and a little practice, balance can be attainable. This column discusses definitions of balance and role conflict, explains the negative consequences of imbalance, and provides tips and suggestions for finding balance.

Defining the Problem

What is balance? What is conflict?

Although work–life balance and work–life conflict are not synonymous, it is often some form of conflict that prevents us from achieving balance. One of the predominant definitions of work–life conflict in the I-O literature states that it is “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). The specific challenges graduate students may face include (a) time constraints and coursework demands, (b) financial constraints, (c) difficulty obtaining feedback from faculty, (d) limited emotional support from friends, and (e) difficulty obtaining information regarding departmental standing and requirements (Cahir & Morris, 1991; Keim, Fuller, & Day, 1996).

We asked several I-O graduate students to tell us about their personal definitions of balance. Bradley Brummel of the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign said that balance “means living a full life and not becoming too consumed with graduate school work.” Nicole Neff of The Pennsylvania State University defines balance as “allowing yourself some time for non-school-related activities. It’s about finding out what you need in order to be happy.” Similarly, Kimberly O’Brien, of the University of South Florida, defines balance as “the state of meeting requirements to your multiple roles (such as the role of a student, a daughter/son, a friend, or a hobbyist) given limited resources, such as time, energy, and money.” Kimberly’s definition hits on one of the biggest challenges faced by graduate students—role conflict.
As graduate students we fill many roles: student, researcher, teaching assistant or instructor, employee, friend, son/daughter, significant other, parent, and so forth. When people have multiple roles, it is impossible for them to meet all the expectations of these roles because they will inevitably conflict in some way (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Carrie Blair, of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, found that balance in graduate school meant maintaining boundaries so that multiple roles did not interfere with one another; she did not allow her role as a contractor to interfere with her role as a student, and she did not allow her roles as a student and contractor to interfere with her personal roles “as a daughter, a sister, and a friend.”

Why is imbalance a problem?

Imbalance is stressful and can yield deleterious effects. Individual-level outcomes of work–life conflict include decreased mental and physical health; dissatisfaction with life; psychosomatic symptoms; depression; increased smoking, alcohol, and substance abuse; mood and anxiety disorders; and hypertension (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Stress can also influence our relationships with our friends, family, and peers. If you are struggling with balance, then hopefully the steps and resources below will help ameliorate your problems.

Solving the Problem: Finding Balance

Step 1: Determine if you have a problem with imbalance.

Listen to your body (e.g., changes in diet or difficulty sleeping), your mood (e.g., agitated or sad), and your friends and family. The signs of imbalance may include (Juarez, 2002):

- Spending less time with the people that matter to you
- Feeling tired
- Dreading another day at work, in the lab, or in the classroom
- Feeling out of control, moody, irritable, or resentful
- Feeling ill or experiencing psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., stomach problems, skin rashes, headaches, colds, etc.)
- Laughing infrequently
- Feeling depressed or self-medicating
- Neglecting or not enjoying activities that used to be gratifying
- Escaping life by daydreaming, sleeping too much, procrastinating or engaging in high-risk activities

If you have a more serious problem, consider getting professional help. Most schools have a health clinic that provides therapy for free or at reduced costs.

Additional Resources

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm
Step 2: Seek advice from peers, mentors and experts.

For advice on how to achieve balance, we consulted several graduate students. Here is how they achieve balance.

- **Work smarter, not harder.** It is pivotal to say “no” to taking on superfluous projects, especially when the outcome is uncertain (such as working with inexperienced students with no faculty guidance) or when the project is not within the student’s research stream. Choose projects wisely and choose coauthors wisely. Not every opportunity is a great opportunity!  Kimberly O’Brien

- **Make plans for extracurricular activities so that there are costs (reputationally/financially) for skipping them.** Things like golf tee times, intramural sports, bar crawls, volunteering activities, and religious activities can be scheduled and then you have to work around them.  Bradley Brummel

- **Combine work and fun.** If I want to work all day on a paper, I’ll usually call a friend and ask if they want to spend the day/evening working at a coffee shop. One of my friends often had work “parties” where everyone would bring their laptops and we’d spend a Saturday night working, but we’d also order in food and have a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* marathon in the background.  Nicole Neff

- **Manage your time effectively.** Having a strategy seemed most important during my first couple of years of graduate school. At that time, classes were extremely demanding, but I also felt pressure to get involved in research and in applied activities. I often felt that the micro tasks from class left little time to deal with the macro extra-curricular tasks. In order to balance, I declared that I did not do class work on the weekends. So, if I worked on the weekend, I tried to make sure that I was working on applied activities or research. It wasn’t always possible to keep this rule, but reminding myself of the rule helped.  Carrie Blair

- **Use technology wisely.** I think you can easily extend the time it takes you to accomplish a task by chatting on AOL or checking your e-mail every 10 minutes. I’ll often go to a coffee shop that doesn’t have wireless (gasp!). Or I’ll take a stack of articles to read—but leave my laptop at home.  Nicole Neff

We also asked work–life balance scholars, Drs. **Lillian Eby** and **Tammy Allen**, to provide advice to graduate students for effectively managing balance. Here is what Dr. Eby had to say:

This is one of the life stages in which it is particularly difficult to achieve balance. This is because not only are graduate students involved in highly demanding “jobs,” but both the personal stakes and the performance expectations are very high. The job is also really challenging, requiring enormous amounts of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral resources. Making it even more difficult is the limited amount of performance feedback, high degree of ambiguity in role requirements, and high role discretion. So, critical ingredi-
ents for success and sanity in graduate school are excellent time management skills, realistic goal setting, and social support. Probably the biggest mistake that graduate students make is not doing sufficient homework before they apply to graduate school such that they don’t have realistic expectations about graduate school life or the field. It is certainly easier to deal with the stress of graduate school if you love what you do! And, if you know what you are getting into BEFORE you enroll in a graduate program, some self-selection can happen on the front end. But, once you are in, you are in!

Drs. Eby and Allen also provided several important pieces of advice for graduate students:

- **Figure out your peak times for various activities.** For example, at what time of the day do you do your best writing? When do you like to exercise? Try to structure a schedule that is built around these peak times. Maintain time for yourself to engage in exercise, hobbies, or whatever it is that relaxes you. Dr. Allen

- **Check your expectations.** Graduate school is difficult and time consuming. If you expect it to be like undergrad then your expectations are not realistic. Success in graduate school typically involves more than a 40-hour work week, that is just reality. Dr. Eby

- **Develop support systems.** Seek out and develop friendships outside your program so that your interests are broadened beyond I-O. Seek out a faculty mentor who is willing to help you set goals, evaluate your progress, and stay on track. Consider a study partner in the program so that you share resources but also get some of your social needs met. Dr. Eby

- **Cultivate outside interests.** Graduate school is hectic and can be all consuming. Get involved in something which appeals to you outside the I-O world: individual or group sports, volunteering, crafting, exercise. This can not only reduce stress but also give you something to look forward to after a long day at “work.” Dr. Eby

- **Never say yes immediately.** From graduate school forward you are likely to always have more work than you can finish. Make thoughtful decisions regarding new projects, assignments, internships, and so on. Dr. Allen

- **Plan your time well.** Set realistic, specific, and attainable goals (remember goal-setting theory?). Ask your major professor for feedback on what you hope to accomplish in a particular timeframe (e.g., semester). Failing to meet self-set goals can quickly erode motivation, and in graduate school it is up to you to set your own goals, monitor progress toward those goals, and allocate your time appropriately to meet those goals. Keep short-term and long-term lists of goals which are updated periodically. Dr. Eby

**Additional Resources**

http://www.gradresources.org/articles/emotional_fatigue.shtml
http://www.educationindex.net/educationarticles/graduateschoolstips/survivinggradschool/howtostressanxiety.html
**Step 3: Transfer the skills to your future. Balance is a life-long endeavor.**

Dr. Allen points out that:

Balance doesn’t mean equal time in each role. For many, graduate school is a time of emphasizing self and career. Recognize that priorities will shift and change over time.

One of the many great things about I-O psychology is that there are diverse job opportunities. With that opportunity comes choices. Make your choice regarding the type of employment you want to have after graduate school with your personal career and family priorities in mind. Be informed regarding the impact that different types of jobs may have on your family life. Travel, long hours, lack of flexibility can all make it challenging to balance work and family demands.

The type of jobs you choose post-graduation will have a large impact on your future work–life balance. You can look up some indicators of future balance by seeking information on Web sites that rank organizations as the best places to work.

**Additional Resources:**

http://www.workingmother.com/web?service=vpage/77

**In Conclusion**

Achieving balance in graduate school can be likened to a gymnast on a balance beam: The gymnast flips head over heels on the beam, teetering this way and that, but maintains position atop the beam. Just like in gymnastics, achieving balance in graduate school takes both practice and motivation.

We would like to thank our column contributors for their thoughtful responses and great advice. We hope you can use some of these tips and tidbits of advice to find the best balance for you! For more great resources for finding balance, please visit our MySpace Web page (http://www.myspace.com/tiptopics).

**References**


