

The Problem with Work-Life Balance Bromides

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Work-Life Balance. It seems that everyone has an opinion on how faculty members should achieve it, and that same everyone is not shy about dispensing that opinion as advice. Social media posts, wellness bingo cards, and well-intentioned emails from people-leaders remind us to balance work and life. Drink water. Go for walks. Take moments of reflection. Re-organize your email inbox. Enroll in a time management webinar. Use a different scheduling program. Sign up for on-line yoga. And if things are really bad: Climb down from your ladder of negativity.

This advice is predicated on two assumptions: (1) that there is a clear dividing line between work and life, and (2) that any imbalance between work and life is the result of individual decisions that we faculty are making. These assumptions – the second of which will be my focus here – make it very easy to dispense simple advice as to how to correct the imbalance.

But what if it isn't that easy or

simple? What if the insidious seeping of work into family life, leisure time, holidays, and community responsibilities is not entirely a matter of individual choice? What else might explain why work-life balance eludes even those faculty members who buy the corporate time management software, drink all the water they can, walk until their feet blister, and diligently take the “work smarter” webinars?

I submit that work-life balance requires more than the individual choices that faculty members already know must be made. (Do any of us *really* need an “I Don't Know Who Needs to Hear This...” tweet to remind us that we need rest?) Work-life balance requires a recognition that faculty are besieged by too much work and there must be administrative will to lessen it. Work-life balance requires that those in leadership positions recognize that the administrative structures that are in place render many of the contributions and accomplishments of faculty invisible. This

requires us to work double-duty – often in excess of 60 hours per week – to complete those invisible tasks as well as the work that is explicitly valued. When the work that we are expected to do in our “free time” becomes a central requirement of our job, then work-life balance becomes impossible to achieve, no matter how often we tune in to on-line yoga.

The individualistic recommendations to take care of ourselves make good sense in many ways but they won't make a dent in the work-life imbalance that is institutionalized in university life. For the imbalance to be corrected, we need structural change. This is usually where the conversation stops. Structural change sounds too big and difficult to undertake. Instead, there is a doubling down on the clichés: Breathe deeply, cherish every moment, enjoy the sunshine, tweet a puppy picture. However, if the University of Saskatchewan wants to be “the university the world needs,” we can't default to what is easy and ineffectual. Let's do what is hard and substantive. This begins with conversations that the University administrators and USFA Executive members need to have with those of us on the proverbial shop

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floor.

Let's talk, for example, about something that may seem relatively minor but that often contributes to work-life imbalance: reviewer requests. All of us have likely been advised to "just say no" when asked to review a publication, tenure or promotion file, or conference session. After all, the advisor will likely point out, "they really don't matter anyway." It sounds simple enough. However, what is the impact on a faculty member whose tenure deadline is approaching and who is still waiting for the journal editors to find reviewers for an article they submitted a year ago? Will that faculty member take comfort in knowing that someone else has achieved work-life balance at their expense? I doubt it. What is a Department Head to say to a candidate for tenure and promotion when their case file is stalled because potential reviewers choose to "just say no" to a task that "doesn't matter anyway"?

The solution – according to most work-life balance commentators – is to put this from our minds. "It is not your responsibility to care for the career of others," they will say. "It is not your problem, and not your fault. Let's go for a walk and talk about mindfulness!" Another – albeit more difficult – solution is to value the collegial work that we do to support colleagues here at the University and in our scholarly and

artistic fields. The tasks which enable research, scholarship, and artistic work (indisputably one of the top mandates of the university) should not be what we do after hours on the treadmill, at our children's sporting events, or in puppy obedience class. Rather than seeing it as an add-on to the work that really counts, service as a reviewer could – no, *should* – be something that is credited meaningfully in salary review, annual review, tenure and promotion procedures. Could assignments of duty accommodate review tasks? Could discipline-specific equivalencies be drawn so that a certain number of reviews carry the weight of a publication, presentation, or perhaps administrative service? Some units (such as my own Department) have moved forward to implement these kinds of changes, but similar change needs to reverberate throughout the institution. This is only one example. There are dozens more. For work-life balance to be achievable, there must be institution-wide valuing of all the work we do, minimizing the need to relegate the supposed "add-on" tasks to our time at home.

There are many other conversations to have. We need to talk about what happens to work-life balance when senior administrators advise us to take holidays and then call Department Heads, some

faculty, and many staff back to the office in July to undertake a UniForum Benchmark Process under strict deadlines. We need to talk about who among the faculty is more likely to be called on to do the undervalued emotional labour of planning retirement parties, hosting guest speakers, supporting distressed students, and mentoring new faculty members through the ConnectionPoint obstacles. This labour often (but certainly not always) falls disproportionately to women faculty, extending the work day well into the after-hours. We should talk about the exploitation inherent in the ways that an agreement to serve on one committee expands, without adequate consultation or even forewarning, into an expectation of service on multiple committees.

How do we achieve work-life balance? We recognize that there is, in fact, too much work, and there must be administrative leadership to manage it. Let's stop dispensing greeting card clichés and move towards an environment where our work is valued and can be accomplished while we are actually at work. This leaves time and energy for life beyond the office, classroom, field site, studio, library, and lab. Achieving work-life balance requires much more than individual choices by each faculty member. It requires leadership and structural change. It requires a whole new bingo card.

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