

## Examining the Work-Life Balance of Faculty in Higher Education

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### Abstract

*The challenges of achieving work-life balance in higher education have been widely documented by previous education studies. Faculty who struggle with achieving balance between their professional and personal lives due to the demands of higher education may eventually become dissatisfied with their job in academia. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of non-tenured, tenure-track, and tenured faculty members' needs to achieve effective work-life balance in their careers. Data were collected from 213 faculty members using Qualtrics and were analyzed using grounded theory. The analysis revealed eight emergent themes to understand faculty members' work-life balance essentials. The themes included a) home responsibilities, b) family support, c) family life pressures, d) daycare/childcare, e) health issues, f) faculty support, g) work culture, and h) personal work challenges. Implications from this study can inform administrators in higher education about the work-life balance needs of their faculty members.*

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**Keywords:** work-life balance, faculty, higher education.

### 1. Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) has become a challenge for many academic professionals in higher education due to the increased demands imposed upon faculty. Faculty members often struggle to balance their academic and personal lives to maintain equilibrium in the academic profession. According to the University of California, Berkeley Faculty Climate Survey, 72% of women and 60% of men reported suffering from work-life imbalance in their faculty positions (Stacy, Sheldon, Goulden, & Frasch, 2011). When comparing institutional rankings, 73% of Assistant Professors, 74% of Associate Professors, and 60% of Full Professors stated feeling exhausted from the lack of work-life balance (Stacy, Sheldon, Goulden, & Frasch, 2011). Conceptually, work-life balance (WLB) is defined as the ability to balance one's time to fulfill both work and home responsibilities, which are enhanced through time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance with both role responsibilities (Kumar, 2017; Mazerolle, 2018). As far as *balance*, it does not refer to a mathematical formula of 50/50, but rather it refers to the comfortable allocation among one's work, and life spheres perceived to be *fair* for each faculty member (Greenhouse, Collins, & Shaw, 2003).

Current research studies have found that achieving work-life balance is not only difficult, but has negative effects among faculty members. A study conducted by Bothwell, found that 40% of university faculty work 10 or more hours per weekday including weekends and holidays, and these faculty members reported suffering from poor mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Bothwell, 2018). Increases in faculty members' workload and the enhanced work expectations of faculty members often results in poor work-life balance (WLB), which leads to enhanced levels of stress (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Senthilkumar, Chandrakumaramangalam, &

Manivannan, 2012) and burnout (Zábrodská, Mudrák, Šolcová, Květon, Blatný & Machovcová, 2018). As a result, the lack of work-life balance negatively affects faculty members' perception of job satisfaction, reduced work productivity; and can lead to academics leaving the profession (Kinman & Jones, 2008).

Therefore, faculty struggle to balance multiple work roles in academic settings to progress in their pedagogy, research agenda, and service obligations to preserve their jobs (Senthilkumar, Chandrakumaramangalam, & Manivannan, 2012). Faculty members, especially women, are leaving the academy for a variety of reasons including childbirth, medical reasons and from a lack of support in achieving work-life balance (Watanabe & Falci, 2018). For instance, faculty report leaving the academy because they believe they cannot raise a happy family and be successful (Lester 2013; Lester & Sallee, 2009). Yucel (2017) also concluded that work-life imbalance could negatively affect the quality of relationships including the marital satisfaction with one's spouse.

Moreover, institutions of higher education often cultivate cultures that hinder work-life balance due to the nature of academia. Academia requires faculty to teach at night, travel to conferences to present research, and work additional hours to meet the requirements for promotion. These responsibilities at times spill over into the home life. This imbalance becomes much more noticeable when faculty experience substantial changes such as having a child, needing adequate childcare on the weekends and in the evening, and caring for elderly parents (Bonneville, 2016; Lester, 2015). Additional everyday challenges for working parents include undertaking household duties such as washing the dishes, preparing meals, sweeping floors, laundry, cleaning the household and raising children (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). While both male and female faculty engage in these duties, studies have demonstrated that women continue to spend more time on these duties in comparison to men (Baker; 2008; Morrison, Rudd, & Nerad, 2011). As such, married faculty reported that prior to having children, the main focus was primarily on their careers, but they still had time for leisure activities with their romantic partner; however, after having children, faculty lost their ability to manage their work-life time effectively (Lester, 2015).

However, a study by Ahmad, Maon, Mansor, and Daud (2018) found that achieving social support serves as a coping mechanism for faculty members and this support has been found to positively relate to quality of life. This social support can be given within a faculty members' family or from an institution (Hobfoll, 2002). With organizational support and family support, faculty are more likely to experience work-life balance which enables them to project more positive energy at work and become more efficient (Russo, Shteigman, & Carmeli, 2016). Additionally, faculty members reported being more satisfied with institutions that supported work-life integration as part of their job, and as a result, enjoyed more emotional and psychological health benefits (McCoy, Newell, & Gardner, 2012).

In contrast, when faculty members did not receive the needed support from their supervisors or the organization, faculty were more likely to experience lower job satisfaction, increased desires in resigning, and dissatisfaction with the work conditions at their university (Ganguly, 2010; Preston, 2004; Pandey & Jha, 2014; Rosser, 2004).

Thus, given the impact of work-life balance on faculty members, there is a need to examine the support mechanisms desired by faculty to achieve work-life balance in academia. The purpose of this study is to investigate the support systems needed for faculty in higher education to achieve greater job satisfaction and maintain work life balance in academia.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Work-life balance (WLB) as a theoretical construct for this study has been previously applied for practical purposes in areas such as human resources and in higher education (Lewis, 2016). Marks and MacDermid (1996) developed the theory of role balance as a WLB construct because it describes a balance of one's professional and personal life roles. The theory of role balance integrates two perspectives, positive and negative role balance (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). *Positive role balance* refers to the "tendency to engage in every role with equally high effort, devotion, attention, and care" (Rantanen, Kinnunen, Mauno, & Tillemann, 2011, p. 29). On the other hand, *negative role balance* refers to the "tendency to engage in roles with apathy, cynicism, low effort, and low attentiveness" (Rantanen et al., 2011, p. 29). In addition, researchers Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) suggest that successful work-life balance occurs when time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance are accomplished. *Time balance* occurs when one invests time appropriately to both the academic profession and to one's family life. *Involvement balance* occurs when one exerts psychological effort and energy to both work and life realms. *Satisfaction balance* occurs when one is satisfied with both work and life roles. However, a work-life imbalance

occurs when one invests more time and personal resources to one role (e.g., work) and a lesser extent to another role (e.g., life) (Greenhaus et al., 2003).

From a balance perspective, work roles and life roles are at a continuum; and to achieve balance one needs to fulfill both roles in one's life without preferring one role to another (Greenhaus et al., 2003). As such, work-life balance based on role balance theory is described as having "low levels of inter-role conflict and high levels of inter-role facilitation" (Frone, 2003, p. 145). While work-life balance is a constant challenge, individuals with the ability to engage in inter-role facilitation between time, involvement, and satisfaction in academia regarding their work and life roles are more likely to be satisfied with their work-life balance experiences (Frone, 2003).

As academics in higher education, the researchers for this study were interested in investigating this phenomenon of achieving work-life balance in academia in order to seek work life balance for themselves. This led to the researchers' guiding question, are faculty in higher education achieving role balance? The researchers sought to investigate this theory of role balance as part of a larger study (Ramos-Salazar & Diego-Medrano, 2020), where they developed a survey that included quantitative questions and one qualitative question. However, in this study, the qualitative question functioned to understand the phenomenon of work-balance in academia and asked what type of assistance or support do faculty need to achieve work-life balance? This central question is the topic addressed in this paper.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The larger study acquired both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from an electronic questionnaire using Qualtrics, an online software program. Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, faculty participants were recruited by an online survey sent to a convenient sample from a medium-sized public higher educational institution in the Southwest region of the United States. To achieve an even greater number of participants, a snowball effect was utilized and the survey was sent out to other universities. The inclusion criteria required participants to be faculty employed at an institution of higher education. Respondents included 213 faculty with 53 men and 160 women. The ethnic composition of participants included 125 Caucasian, 23 Hispanic, 8 African-American, 7 Asian-American, 9 Native-American, 4 Middle-Eastern, and 37 Other/Mixed. The mean age of the participants included 41.83 (*Range*: 24-73). The marital status of participants included 80.1% married, 11.4% single, 3.8% divorced, 2.8% cohabiting, and 1.9% widowed. Regarding children, 74.5% of faculty indicated having children in the home with an average of two children. The tenure status of faculty included 55 non-tenure track, 80 tenure-track, and 78 tenured. The average reported time of service in higher education was 7.35 years. Of the 213 faculty who responded to the survey, only 88 responded to the qualitative question.

#### **3.2 Data Analysis**

Data results analyzed for the qualitative question following the process of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers engaged in an in-depth textual analysis of each line, line by line coding, using open and axial coding procedures. After identifying patterns in the data, initial codes were developed. These codes were separated further into categories and broader themes emerged. The researchers agreed 100% that the codes adequately represented each of the themes.

### **4. Findings**

This study exposed the different types of assistance or supports desired by faculty members to enhance their work-life balance efforts at their institutions of higher education. After the analysis, eight different themes emerged including a) faculty support, b) family support, c) family life pressures, d) home responsibilities, e) health issues, f) daycare/childcare, g) work culture, and h) personal work challenges. These eight themes were conceptualized as work-life balance supports, using the secondary/axial coding process. Thus, this section will discuss the different supports needed for faculty in higher education to achieve work-life balance from faculty members' perspectives.

The results of the central qualitative question proposed to participants resulted in the eight themes listed above. The findings suggest there are a number of supports needed to achieve work-life balance for academics in higher education. A discussion of each theme and the supports desired by faculty will follow.

#### **4.1 Work-Life Balance Support or Need for Support**

Participants identified their desired work-balance supports from their institution and from home to achieve role balance. The researchers divided the supports identified into two sub-categories, faculty support and family support. Faculty support included support from the institution and administration and support for working parents. Family support included assistance with taking care of children and parents while also understanding the different work demands of higher education.

#### **4.1.1 Faculty Support**

The requirements for academics in higher education to achieve tenure and full professor include the following: instructional, intellectual, and service responsibilities. The expectations for faculty can be overwhelming especially when one does not have support from the institution or administration. This was supported by a participant who stated [I need] “better support from my department and institution.” Thus, faculty cannot meet the expectations required of them if the “expectations at work [do not] match their resources.” This was evident by the number of respondents who stated they needed “more supports for research and writing’ and additional supports “to [learn to] balance teaching and service” because of the “pressures to produce” scholarly works. This led to an additional layer of support from colleagues. Respondents stated they needed “supportive coworkers” and/or “support from other faculty members or a support group to discuss the stressors of academia.”

Working mothers in academia also stated they needed “better institutional support for parents.” It seems that since the increase in the percentage of women in academia has grown in the past two decades, from 33.5% assistant professors in 1982 to 46.2% in 2005 (Gee & Nortin, 2009), there has not been a significant shift to recognize that additional supports should be put in place for women in academia. This was evident by a participant who stated it “would be great to have more time off when babies arrived.” Another participant stated she needed “more support as a working mom.” Overall, faculty stated they needed a “better [work] culture [to achieve] work-life balance” and “better institutional supports for parents.”

#### **4.1.2 Family Support**

Higher education has greater work demands and can be hard for faculty who have families. Most of the respondents needed support from a spouse or family to meet their job demands. One respondent stated she needed “support from [her] husband and others to help take care of [the] girls when I needed to do grading and class prep.” Another respondent added I need “a spouse [who] would assist with taking care of my house or mother.” Aside from support to meet the demands of home life, one respondent stated, “I simply ask my friends and family to understand that some days and nights I will have activities that must be fulfilled at the university.”

Although most of the respondents sought assistance and support from others, one respondent stated, “My husband is incredibly supportive and we live close to my parents. My department is [also] family friendly.” The need for family and work support is reflective in the last respondent’s statements in order to achieve role balance in higher education.

#### **4.1.3 Family Challenges**

As an academic in higher education, “a significant portion of the work week [can] interfere with family life.” This can provide challenges for the family and can contribute an additional layer of pressures for faculty. Although work tends to overflow into family time, many have sought ways to provide boundaries for themselves while others are still trying to find that balance.

#### **4.1.4 Family Life Pressures**

Traditionally most jobs are nine-five. At the end of the day, you leave work behind and go home to spend time with family. This is not so with academics. “My job is not a simple 9-5 commitment.” Work “expectations eat up a significant portion of the work week.” One respondent stated, “Ideally, I want a partner who understands the demands on my time...” Additionally, faculty contracts state you may have “other duties as assigned.” These duties may include, teaching in the evenings, course overloads, advising students, and fulfilling service obligations as required for promotion and tenure. There is another added responsibility for academics and that is the pressure to, publish or perish.

It seems the job duties and responsibilities will “overflow into family time” and may seem that “work obligations are difficult to juggle with a family.” One respondent stated, [I wish I had] less guilt from my family about travel

and days when I need to work late.” Many faculty found themselves working “on the weekends” and spending less time with their families. A few respondents stated, “Family should come first” and either had a strategy or were seeking advice from others to put their family first. “My family comes first, always. I often have to work long hours at night, after my children go to bed to stay on top of my [work] demands.” Another respondent shared, “I also think I have worked to strike that balance for my own sense of well-being. For example, one day out of the weekend I don’t touch work; in fact, I try to leave work at work ... [or] if needed I come in early.” On the other hand, others were seeking advice. “I don’t think there is one thing in particular I need, but I do need help with decision-making on how to achieve work/life balance well and mentorship by people that actually do it well would be useful.”

The traditional responsibilities of raising a family can be difficult for faculty members due to the unusual work demands and family pressures. A response by a woman in academia regarding family life balance stated, “[My] husband is also an academic. The stressors are different. I still contribute more at home and have a greater impact on my work.” Therefore, it was apparent that many were lacking work/life balance in order to fulfill the expectations required by having a family. Consequently, it may seem the traditional roles set by society for men and women regarding “helping at home” still held true but in some instances, this was not always the case based upon this respondent; “I am lucky to have a true partner in child rearing. [I] couldn’t do it without him.”

#### **4.1.5 Home Responsibilities**

Many respondents stated they needed support with typical home responsibilities and an “egalitarian spouse” who would help “with [the] cooking and cleaning.” It seems that many respondents needed “more help at home with cooking and cleaning.” The responses ranged from “a maid, help with home chores, cleaning, and grocery shopping, an occasional house cleaning service, a house keeper and cook, a cook/ shopper/ house cleaner, money for a house cleaner, and a nanny would be nice to pick up kids from school.” Therefore, there needs to be “another me, one to do the work stuff and one to do all the home stuff.” Based upon the responses, it is evident that maintaining work life role balance was lacking and home responsibilities were taking a toll.

#### **4.1.6 Daycare/Childcare**

The need for support as working parents was especially evident regarding the need for maternity leave, parental leave, childcare, and affordable childcare or assistance with paying for childcare for additional work duties after hours. Due to the additional responsibilities of academics that can result in traveling and attending events in the evening, childcare was a very pressing issue.

One respondent made mention that a ‘cultural change [was needed] that acknowledges that women have babies’ and “needed time off when they arrived.” Thus, many respondents mentioned the support for “maternity leave, and parental leave.” Prior research has demonstrated that a gender bias exists in higher education, and that cultural and environmental changes are needed because institutional cultures tend to value work more than their faculty members (Bingham & Nix, 2010). The second significant issue was the need for “affordable childcare” or “funds to pay for childcare.” The third support regarding childcare was the need for an “on campus daycare.” There was also a mention of “reliable childcare especially for late evenings or weekends and travel for work.” One respondent also needed “occasional babysitting or live in help [to attend] conferences” and another mentioned “faculty talks that do not start at four.” “I bring my kids to many university events” due to the “unusual hours” of my work, demands. Due to the high percentage of women in this study, childcare was of the utmost concern for them as academics.

#### **4.1.7. Health Care**

Health care was important due to “family-related issues” and self-care. “I am a single mother with a handicapped adult son. Sometimes I need respite for his care.” Another issue regarding health care was “access to free counseling” for self and family members. An “inexpensive counseling service that [could] really assess how I’m doing [regarding work/life balance] and could work with me would be very useful.” Not only issues regarding the need for healthcare were at the forefront but also, “lowered healthcare costs” were as equally important for faculty.

### **4.2 Individual Support Challenges**

#### **4.2.1 Work Culture**

Although many choose a career in higher education and were “aware of both the demands and the flexibility” of higher education, many were not prepared for the rigor of the work culture in academia. Many faculty members

were overwhelmed with their teaching responsibilities, time for research and writing, and the service demands required for all faculty in higher education who were on the tenure track.

Teaching in higher education can require academics to “teach in the evenings and on weekends.” As a result, respondents also asked for “smaller classes” and the ability to “offer graduate courses during the day so I do not have to regularly teach evenings and weekends.” At times due to faculty shortages, “teaching loads [can be] very high leaving little free time” for anything else. Thus most of the respondents asked for “reduced course loads” or “lighter course loads” “every two or three years to catch up in data collection and writing.” Consequently, respondents also asked for “additional staff support” such as a “teaching assistant (TA)” for “assistance with course loads and grading.”

Another requirement of academics is the expectation to conduct research and write. As a result, a common theme among respondents was the need for “more support [for] research and writing.” “A research assistant or administrative help” could provide researchers with the support needed based upon the high “research expectations” required of all tenured faculty. “Time to write is what stresses me out with so many teaching and service responsibilities.”

The final expectation of academics was the responsibility of providing service for the university. Service can become overwhelming for many faculty who want to give back and at times teaching and research consequently suffer. If there were “greater campus support for racial minorities and first generation students” then I could dedicate more of my time to my research and teaching. As a result, many respondents asked for “fewer service expectations” and “protection from service obligations.”

Overall, “the demands in academia seem” disproportionate and many faculty become stressed due to the work culture obligations in obtaining tenure. If more forms of assistance or supports were provided to faculty to maintain balance regarding their teaching, research, and service obligations it would lessen the stresses many academics encountered. Additionally, more “transparent tenure requirements” would also lessen the stress for academics seeking tenure.

#### **4.2.2 Personal Work Challenges**

Personal work challenges or dilemmas facing faculty involved the ability to make more money by leaving academia or a personal goal of working towards achieving role balance. One respondent stated, “I am actually in a field where I could leave the university and make more money in a private practice. I have actually thought about this many times but always come back to educating the next generation.” Others wanted “part time work that paid adequately”; “a higher salary” or “financial compensation” for the work accomplished.

To achieve work/life balance, a few respondents wanted to work on “self-regulating skills” in order to obtain “time management” skills. Furthermore, the need to assist other minorities and underserved populations when support was lacking was one respondents struggle, “I pick up a lot of slack” and as a result, my teaching and research suffers.

Overall, the consensus was that faculty were struggling with the work demands imposed upon them. One respondent struggled with the idea of leaving academia because then he would not have to deal with the stresses and pressures of the added workload due to the lack of funding to hire additional professors to staff his department. Others were seeking financial compensation for the extra responsibilities they were providing for their department, college, or university.

### **5. Discussion**

The results of this study highlight the support needs of faculty in academia. In particular, faculty noted the need for work-life balance support from their institutions. This is consistent with Austin’s (2006) assertion that work-life balance is not merely a personal problem, but rather an institutional problem because constituents within institutions (e.g., departments) are capable of developing resources (e.g., on campus day care, flexible hours) to alleviate the burden instigated by work-life imbalance. Additionally, because work-life balance is a multi-layered problem, faculty also reported needing support from their family and close relatives. Achieving support from internal social networks may address faculty members’ role balance issue of performing faculty duties both at the campus and off



campus (Voydanoff, 2005). Thus, faculty with institutional resources and access to an internal social network of support may be better able to balance their careers and personal lives.

Findings from this study also revealed that the home-life sphere challenges are multifaceted. The home-life sphere includes several themes from this study such as family challenges, family pressures, home responsibilities, childcare needs, and health care. These challenges place a high demand on faculty members, and they can accumulate and overlap, thereby, making it difficult for faculty to fulfill their work and family roles when work is at the forefront (Quick, Henley, & Quick, 2014; Rauntanen et al., 2011). These home-life sphere challenges point to the need for initiatives that include childcare, flexible work hours, and job sharing, especially for faculty with limited or no internal social networks (Byrne, 2005). These suggested work initiatives can help faculty fulfill the role needs of both the family and the home by creating a positive role balance (Clark, 2000; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). In addition, when faculty feel fulfilled and satisfied with their work-life roles this enhances their productivity and loyalty to their academic institution (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Bell, Rajendran, & Theiler, 2012; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001).

The results of the individual support challenges also point to faculty's subtle acceptance of the work-life imbalance norm in academia. Faculty, especially those in tenure-track positions, knowingly continued to struggle in adapting to the work culture and expectations of academia expecting this imbalance to resolve itself overtime. Furthermore, faculty who suffered from a role imbalance seemed to take personal responsibility in managing their multiple roles in the academy instead of seeking support, direction or guidance from their institutions.

These high demands and expectations of the profession including teaching, research and service responsibilities call for the need for flexible teaching loads, research assistant support, balanced service requirements, and transparency in the tenure process. Because faculty are expected to fulfill a range of roles, institutions with a "family friendly" culture, that include work-life balance policies and practices, are more likely to retain faculty members across ranks (Lester, 2015; McCoy, Newell, & Gardner, 2012). As such, because faculty members report facing a lack of work-life balance skills (e.g., self-regulation; time management), institutions should consider offering workshops or professional development opportunities in these areas to maintain a better work life culture.

### **5.1 Limitations**

The research design provided several limitations for this study. First, the design was a survey that consisted of only one qualitative question to understand role balance. This limited the ability of the researchers to obtain rich think description to understand the phenomenon in question. Second, the sample did not include other forms of qualitative procedures to achieve triangulation although the sample did provide insights to answer the research question. Further research is needed to fully understand the implications of role balance for faculty in higher education.

### **5.2 Implications**

The results from this study have several implications for administrators in higher education, those who work at institutions of higher education, and other entities that have invested their time and efforts in providing work-life balance for their employees. These implications are important in order to retain faculty and shed light on the importance of providing support systems for their faculty.

The most significant implication was the need to provide social and resource supports at the departmental, college, and university levels in order to assist faculty in maintaining role balance. Not providing sufficient supports for faculty or imposing additional responsibilities in the form of "other duties as assigned" can cause undue stress, minimize output and eventually drive away faculty who are passionate about educating the next generation.

Another significant implication is that more women are in academia than ever before and as such, there has not been much of a cultural paradigm shift to address the needs of a working parent, or mother. Many working parents are trying to juggle the responsibilities of work and home; and are finding that there is no such thing as work-life balance or that it is very hard to obtain when administration is not cognizant of this fact.

The results of this study have provided much insight into the lack of role balance for faculty who work at institutions of higher education especially working mothers. Additional research in work-life balance is required to fully understand how role balance can be achieved for faculty who work in higher education; and, if it is possible for faculty at institutions of higher education to reach work-life balance if administration does not take note of this imbalance.

## 6. Conclusions

Conclusions from this study reflect that most faculty who work in higher education have not achieved role balance due to the unique responsibilities and the demands set by institutions. Faculty may at one time not minded the added responsibilities imposed upon them, but at some point, the work demands began taking a toll on them. This was especially evident when the work demands were continually spilling over into their home life and was affecting the family. Thus, working at an institution of higher education is not an 8-5 job and requires faculty to work after hours and on weekends to meet the requirements of service, teaching and scholarly endeavors. If work life balance by faculty is to be achieved, then adequate supports need to be put in place at home or at work to maintain effective role balance.

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