HOW TO BALANCE LIKE AN ACADEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The academic's tasks are usually succinctly described as research, teaching, and service. To be successful in one's career, each of these must be kept in balance, and prioritized correctly. This is challenging, as the tasks usually are running in parallel, all are time demanding, and any one task can become overwhelming as deadlines approach. We first take a deeper look at the various tasks that must be balanced by the academic. Following that discussion, we provide a series of suggestions for how junior academics can become good at prioritization and other skills that help them achieve the desired balance between the tasks of research, teaching, and service, and between work and personal life.

Keywords: academic life, citizenship, dissemination, education, efficiency, engagement and internationalization, funding, research, stress.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being an academic requires that the academic performs at an international level in research, delivers excellent education, engages in research dissemination to a variety of stakeholders, contributes to the department's and wider business school's activities. It also requires that the academic is involved in engagement and internationalization activities, participates proactively in the department's life, undertakes large(r) administrative roles, and is held in esteem in the international research community. At the same time, we have personal lives and responsibilities which cannot be ignored.

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It is a lot to ask! In this editorial, we explore the realities of this imposing balancing act, and provide some thoughts and guidance to help achieve this balance.

2. THE TASKS OF AN ACADEMIC

The academic's tasks are usually listed in short form as research, teaching, and service. To be successful in one's career, each of these must be kept in balance, and prioritized correctly. This is challenging, as the tasks are usually running in parallel, all are time demanding, and any one task can become overwhelming as deadlines approach. Further, the tasks can all be divided into sub-components: collecting research data and disseminating research results; service to the college and to the professional community; and the varying tasks involved in course delivery. At times, the academic feels like the circus performer balancing several spinning plates on poles, where the challenge is to keep everything spinning at once. This section takes a deeper look at the various tasks that must be balanced by the academic.

Research

For most academics, research is seen as the "coin of the realm." This is definitely the case at research-intensive business schools. Research is what builds one's reputation, and research is necessary for meeting requirements for tenure and promotion. Probably more than any other task, research is transportable: a strong research record can be attractive to other schools and provide opportunities for career advancement through relocation. Research brings visibility and opportunity: to edit prestigious journals, or run academic institutes. Most career-thinking academics will free up as much time as possible to do research; and the need is never more pronounced than when there is an upcoming tenure or promotion decision. Thus, academics regularly need to publish in highly ranked journals. Some business schools follow the Academic Journal Guide (published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools) or the FT 50 journals (published by Financial Times). Other business schools have drawn up their own journal-ranking lists. Depending on the business school, research monographs, edited anthologies, textbooks, and book chapters can be helpful in supplementing high-quality journal articles. Usually, business schools appreciate when academics present their research at one or more of the leading marketing conferences. Research also brings opportunity to work with top Ph.D. students and serve as first supervisor/senior adviser, develop and administer Ph.D. courses, and serve on Ph.D. committees within and sometimes outside the business school.

Education

Research is what drives research-intensive business schools' other activities, most notably education. Academics must therefore participate in course and program development. For research, academics must publish in high-ranking journals; for education, academics should receive excellent teaching evaluations. In contrast to the somewhat general agreement we see across business schools on the so-called best journals, most business schools have developed their own ways of measuring the quality of education delivery. Often, excellence in education is judged only by how students answer one single question: "this academic was overall a good teacher;" or, "I learned a lot in this course." Academics should participate in teaching at all levels (B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., and Executive). Business schools also require that academics demonstrate seriousness in their teaching, and that they adhere to academic integrity and engage in pedagogical initiatives that ensure the students' mastering of the subject taught. Also in education, academics must be willing to participate in department and business school-wide education activities such as study boards. To some extent, academics can combine their activities in research and education. For example, academics could author textbook(s) and case studies for the international market; such textbooks could be general, but they could also be much more aligned with the academics' own research area and perhaps even based more or less on their own published research. Academics could appear regularly as guest speakers outside the academic world on the basis of their educational expertise. For example, they could be involved in relevant professional field(s) in education. They could also be members of book publishers' inspection committees. Academics also often are involved in international accreditation procedures, occasionally as external examiner of study results and theses (M.Sc. and Ph.D.). These last few examples highlight the important gatekeeping responsibility of the academic.

Funding

Today, must business schools depend (to at least some extent) on external funding. Thus, academics are expected to participate in (large-scale) external funding efforts, sometimes as principal investigator. External funding provides the resources needed to conduct meaningful and relevant research, which can bolster one's academic career in the long run. Many academics are under greater pressure to increase their grant funding, at the same time as state or national funding appropriations are shrinking. Given this fiscal reality, external funding will continue to be a requirement and, increasingly, an expectation for career academics. Business school leaders can create a culture in which significant grant writing success is rewarded, and can provide research support offices and/or local funding committees to assist in increasing the quality of grant applications and the probability of grant success. With a sufficient level of support, academics reasonably could be expected to participate and to benefit. For example, academics can develop and leverage their department's industry contacts, or they can help train junior researchers on how to write successful grants or identify research foundations. By volunteering as the funding committee chairperson of the department, an academic can assist the department head in developing research funding strategy, setting research funding goals, serving as the departmental point person for grant-related issues, forming liaisons with other research institutions, or organizing seminars to assist other faculty in grant writing and fundraising activities.

Dissemination

Historically, business schools have focused on academic relevance and impact, which has influenced the problems we investigate in academic research. We conduct research into pressing topics affecting decision-makers and society, and our results are potentially meaningful to these audiences. Accordingly, many, if not most, of our leading academic journals insist on a discussion of managerial implications alongside contributions to theory. Today, business schools face growing pressure to produce public value in addition to academic relevance and impact. As a consequence, Cardiff Business School, for example, became the world's first public value business school (Lindgreen et al., 2019). The public value agenda is increasingly important, as society turns to business schools for solutions to global issues, and national governments have begun to use public value as a criterion when they allocate funding (e.g., in the UK REF, which takes place about every six years). Academics should therefore demonstrate how their research brings public value to the wider society. For example, academics could engage in collaborations with business. They could also inform and engage broader audiences through media interviews or workshops with practitioners, or they could sit on research funding bodies.

Citizenship

A business school should not be a hotel where academics only come in when they teach. Rather, a business school is a community where academics also engage in collaborative research, education, and funding activities and participate in intellectual exchanges related to such activities. Thus, academics should participate actively in research seminars, brown-bag sessions, and the like. They should be active in the promotion of an open and inspiring research debate culture. Academics must also be willing to undertake large administrative roles within the department, as well as represent the department within and occasionally outside the wider business school. They should be willing to serve as a member of their business school's board, research platforms, academic council, and study boards, among others. From time to time, academics must be willing to take on tasks that benefit the department if so required, for example being mentor to more inexperienced colleagues.

Engagement and Internationalization

A final area in which academics are expected to contribute to is the promotion of the department and the wider business school to external stakeholders (e.g., industry sectors, businesses, government and non-government bodies), the establishment of strategic alliances between the department and the wider business school and other schools and universities, the recruitment of (international) students, and research platforms, among other things. Academics could also work at maintaining relations with alumni. Finally, academics should participate in scouting for and recruitment of academic faculty.

3. THE BALANCING ACT

As academics, we have all been assessed by metrics. We hear from our earliest days in Ph.D. programs that we need to balance among the aforementioned responsibilities, sometimes shortlisted as the "big three" of research, teaching, and service (i.e., citizenship). For most of us, and particularly early in our careers, we often are told that we are most rewarded for research. Tenure and promotion to associate professor may officially be based on the "big three," but, in reality, one needs to be rated as outstanding in research and teaching; satisfactory service is often good enough. It is especially true for junior academics to become good at prioritization and other skills that help them achieve the desired balance. In this section, we review some of these skills and how they can be best implemented.

To Prioritize between Importance of Tasks

To be able to prioritize between important and less important tasks is an imperative, and for most career academics, many of the most important tasks often are believed to be related with research. We are constantly performing a balancing act, however, with education responsibilities (including course preparation, delivery, and grading, not to mention the need to consistently upgrade and renew education material), as well as department and school committee tasks, and other services to the community (journal reviewing and editing, participation in business associations, organization of national and international conferences, and so on). If an academic is prioritizing top-level research, for promotion or tenure, career visibility, or whatever reason, then that is the most important task. Especially for tenure-track academics, it is critical not to get sidetracked, and many department chairpersons will be sensitive to this need. The new hire will be given a limited number of course preparations, may be kept away from MBA teaching (or assigned MBA versions of courses which they have already mastered at the undergraduate level), and will try to assign a minimum amount of departmental service. This will vary from school to school, but in a school where research and teaching need to be "outstanding" and service needs to be "satisfactory," the chairperson will ensure that a "satisfactory" level of service is attained.

We can also address here the issue of balancing research task efforts. With the omnipresent discussion of citations, "rookies" in the academic world sometimes believe that the more publications they have, the better their chance for a job or a promotion. This, however, is not the case, as most schools will look at the total number of publications in high-rated journals, as well as the number of citations, as evidence of research impact. It is better to have a big article in a top journal than two or three smaller articles in less-known journals. Furthermore, when one starts to "learn the game," one should substitute lower-level activities with (fewer) higher-level activities.

To Prioritize between Urgency of Tasks

In the preceding section, we noted that academics are responsible for a wide variety of tasks, any of which can climb to the top of the list of priorities at any time, much like the performer with the spinning plates. The dean imposes a real deadline for the development of a new masters' program, or the chairperson needs the merit reviews done in two weeks. At the same time, the departmental secretary requests next semester's syllabi, which will take up more time than usual since one of your courses is a new assignment. Inevitably, teaching and service requirements will inundate academics some weeks, and academics therefore have little choice but to put the research on the back burner. Good performance on these tasks is rewarded in terms of visibility and merit, and may play a role in a tenure or promotion decision. And urgency is a real thing—many of these tasks have real deadlines, while finishing up a research paper could be pushed back a week or two due to circumstances. It is important to always have the research priorities in mind, so that one can return to these priorities quickly when time becomes available. One idea, if possible, is to block a time period of weeks or months, which will be devoted to non-stop (or almost non-stop) research. As editors, we notice an uptick in submissions at the end of the summer and at the end of holiday seasons, since researchers finally found a few weeks of “me time” to finish up and finally submit the research project that had been pushed aside for too long!

To Look for Synergies between the Tasks

As business-to-business marketing academics, our research interests are never too far from managerial practice. We inherently work on projects whose results provide value to middle- and senior-level marketing managers. Thus, there sometimes will be synergy between research and education for us, and it is misleading to think of these as separate silos competing for our time. It may not happen in every case. However, sometimes that case study or those managerial interviews undertaken for an academic research project can turn out to be a great illustrative example that can be pulled out and used in an MBA class. Students like the occasional war story. A career academic may not be able to talk about “those 20 years I spent working at Ford,” but certainly many good research studies with meaningful managerial implications can make for just as compelling a classroom story. Incidentally, sometimes a similar interaction can occur between service and teaching. A consulting project may turn out to be a good classroom illustration (with client name and details disguised); an on-site corporate lecture might lead to an insightful discussion that could be used when back on campus.

It might also be possible for academics to set up a research project with their M.Sc. students. Together, the academic and the students identify a relevant research problem and review the literature in order to design the survey questionnaire. After data collection (perhaps undertaken by the students), both parties analyze the data, discuss the findings, and draw up theoretical and managerial conclusions the result of which could be a journal publication. Obviously, when academics supervise their M.Sc. thesis students, the chances of co-publishing a journal publication is even greater. Sometimes, M.Sc. students have only three months for their thesis, and/or the academic has to supervise a high number of students. In such cases, academics must plan their supervision especially diligently, and there probably will be fewer opportunities for the students to stray off course. Finally, a part of any academic’s job is the development of courses and programs. Academics can ponder whether this task presents an opportunity for a research activity that could result in a publication of some sort, too.

To Manage Time Efficiently

As we have noted, it is important to devote as much time as possible to academic research. However, the allocated time must be used wisely; some projects may not come to fruition, but the goal is a consistent hit rate over several years, and this is where time management comes into play. There are, of course, plenty of time management guidebooks available and rules of thumb to live by, but the reality is that one has to stay focused, and do whatever works to improve time management. Focus is difficult when trying to maintain a balance. Final exams and term projects may take days to grade. Precious hours are diverted away from research during these periods; unlike most research projects, there are real deadlines to submit grades, and inevitably research gets off track. A major business school or department committee assignment can similarly eat away at research time. Additionally, different research projects may be in different stages of completion, so while one is just getting written up for journal submission, another requires questionnaire pretesting, and a third needs more development on the conceptual model. It is important to mobilize every one of the limited hours available per week. One suggestion that has worked well is that when the grading gets tedious, or a standstill is reached in a research project, it is human nature to put it away for a while... but there should always be something productive to turn to. Academics should always have a "bottom drawer" of ideas that they can start on, or share with their Ph.D. student. Use that time to get the last cleanup done on a manuscript you are preparing to submit to a journal. Prime-time work hours are not wasted, and the sense of accomplishment, even for a modest achievement, is satisfying. It is better to get back to the heavier lifting after such a break.

To Manage E-mails Efficiently

Some academics keep the number of e-mails in their inbox to a minimum. They use the Create Rule feature in Windows Outlook to route non-important e-mails to their junk e-mail inbox. In the same vein, one should only subscribe to important newsletters. When e-mails continue to be received from a particular source, this should be reported as spam. Do not cc in everyone when you answer an e-mail, and ask that your colleagues do not cc you when they answer an e-mail sent to numerous people (unless necessary, of course). If you read an e-mail, you should act upon it immediately (if, of course, you are not required to do some work first), as otherwise you will have to open this e-mail again at a later stage and once again think about what you will have to do. Thus, answer the e-mail and then archive it (if necessary) or delete it. On archiving, one should set up in a logical manner one's e-mail folders that are needed. One could perhaps use a system built around one's tasks (e.g., research, education, funding, dissemination, citizenship, and engagement and internationalization). If one is head of a department, for example, there will be other important folders such as those for individual faculty in the department. Another good rule is to check one's e-mails regularly, at least several times a day and expect the same behavior from the colleagues with whom one works. This is only professional courtesy. The checking of e-mails could be on the way to work, or when one has a natural break from bigger activities during the day. Following this advice, it is possible to have an e-mail inbox that actually becomes one's to-do list.

Now, the reality is that not everyone is so good at managing their e-mails in this way. An old-fashioned to-do list might do just as well. Some academics are veteran list-makers. Everything goes on the list, whether it is research, education, or service related, or even not related to work. It is very useful to have all tasks written down, so there is no need to keep it all in memory. Once the list is written, it is much easier to determine the easy tasks that can be knocked off in an hour, versus those tasks that will be days or weeks. Then, upon completion, scratch it off the list! There is nothing more satisfying than watching the remaining items on the list dwindle down to the last few.

To Build a Network for Collaboration and Support

It goes without saying that complementarity in research skills will pay off, as in any other line of work. This might mean complementarity in terms of research specialty (a logistics person working with a marketing person on a supply-chain paper, for example), but it might be in other ways as well. Your research collaborator may be able to work on path models until 3:00 am night after night, but may turn to you to write a coherent discussion and conclusions section since he/she knows you are a really good writer. If that works for both of you, great! Another way a colleague can help is in pushing for timely results. As noted above, we often get sidetracked by reality. Having a coauthor who actually works faster than you can keep you from getting diverted. A colleague who runs several path models, e-mails them, then checks the next day to see what you thought and whether you had started writing the discussion section yet, can be a not-so-subtle reminder to keep on track!

Being embedded in a network of colleagues, in fact, probably is one of the most important factors to academics' success. When academics collaborate with colleagues from other universities (in other countries), they can tap into these colleagues' ecosystem that could provide additional sources for research funding. It might also suddenly be easier to conduct cross-country data collections. But, networks do not only consist of academics. One should also consider including businesses in one's research and teaching activities. For example, such businesses could offer opportunities for student internships, or they could sit on your program's study board providing input to one's research and teaching agendas.

To Drop Collaborations that Do Not Work

All through one's research career, but especially when the tenure clock is ticking, one must maintain a focus on the best possible research opportunities. As mentioned before, sometimes one hits a dead-end. (But, a project that may not give rise to a strong research paper might turn out to be an excellent lecture or case study for a graduate class, so indeed all is not lost.) Nevertheless, one wants to minimize the number of true dead-ends. It may turn out that a promising joint project is not going to take off… or a one-shot research paper together with a new colleague does not have any promise for a later string of papers. If this is the case, it is the time to move on, and to devote research time on projects that have a higher and/or a longer-term payoff!

To be Sure about an Idea before Embarking on it

One does not want to spend valuable research time on a topic that ultimately is unpublishable: the topic is too incremental or already over studied; the topic is something that was maybe a hot research topic years ago or uses an outdated analytical technique; the research design is insufficient or fatally flawed. While it is not possible to ensure ultimate acceptance of a research paper at a top journal, there are several things that can be done to screen ideas and to ensure their value. Present the ideas at an informal brown-bag session in front of colleagues; present early versions of the research at local or regional conferences; work with your senior adviser or senior colleagues in your department; read the "directions for future research" in the most recent publications; check the Marketing Science Institute's list of current research priorities or other similar lists, and so on.

To Be Inspired by the Best

You got to know the senior adviser on your dissertation and your committee members. What was their work ethic? How did they come up with good research ideas? What did you learn about the research process from them that potentially can increase your chances of publishing success? They want to see you succeed, and can provide direction for your research career. You can also look at the top names in your field. Who are the people who keep popping up in your literature search? Visit their homepages, and analyze how they have built up their CV. Are they still research active? They might like receiving an e-mail from you or meeting you at a conference. Do not feel intimidated by academics having a big name; most academics still remember how they started in academia and are only happy to meet with more inexperienced staff. They often have research projects that they are too busy to embark on, and they would therefore like to team up with capable and willing colleagues. As Yogi Berra once said, "You can observe a lot by watching." So watch what they do, and observe the kinds of questions they ask that may lead to the next breakthrough research project. They may seem to be miles ahead. They just have more experience and are good at asking the most pertinent research questions! You will be there too at some time, and you will be able to pass on this wisdom to the next generation.

Find Your Wow Factor

Finding one's wow factor might be a tough call for the new Ph.D. just starting on a tenure track in a new business school. After all, such colleagues think mostly about their recently completed dissertation, how to turn it into an article or two, and how to start up the next big research project. These are all-consuming thoughts! But, in a moment of reflection, it makes sense to think of what it is that you add as a research colleague. Marketing strategists speak of the customer value proposition: what is it that makes this product different, in some important way to customers, from other products offered by competitors? In the same way, it is never too early for a junior academic to brainstorm about what is his/her value proposition. You are one of thousands of marketing academics in the area of business-to-business. What is special about you, and what value do you bring to a research collaboration? What are you really good at? What work or life experiences can you bring to the table that make you stand out? If you want to be a top-10 or top-100 academic in your area in 15 years' time, what should you be doing now?

How to Achieve an Acceptable Work-Life Balance

Achieving an acceptable work-life balance is a topic that increasingly is discussed in academia and elsewhere. Many academics report that they have a poor work-life balance, leaving them with little time to be with their family and friends or to engage in non-academic activities. As previously discussed, it is true that there is no end to what an academic could do. Academics are evaluated and measured constantly (e.g., student evaluations, paper and funding reviews, citations and h-index measures, and so on). Furthermore, academics often move between universities and indeed countries, and although this may land that coveted job, it creates sources of stress (e.g., selling and buying a house, contracting a moving company, paperwork for immigration and insurances, getting accustomed to the new university and possibly country, and many others). By nature, many academics are ambitious and want to go up through the ranks, which obviously results in pressure, and quite possibly, increased stress. And, when you first have achieved that coveted position, you might realize that the requirements are just too many. Thus, the first thing one should do is to have realistic expectations: do I want to undertake all what it takes to go into academia and, possibly, to get promoted? Going through the Ph.D. process should give an academic a first good idea of what academia is like… but one should not forget that many Ph.D. students have much more research time than at any other stage later in life! We will suggest some ways of take away the pressure or, at least, to alleviate it from time to time. One could celebrate successes. This could be weekly smaller celebrations after a hard week, or it could be a bigger celebration after the acceptance of a paper or funding or a good student evaluation. However, one should also remember to "celebrate" during the day: if one works 10 hours a day, one works hard, but not necessarily efficiently. The brain needs to relax, and so you should consider going for a walk or jog during the day. Inspiration can strike at those times! Think of combining research interests with your other interests.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The academic lifestyle is hard to explain to non-academics. While most have heard of the phrase "publish or perish," it is perhaps surprising to some that we are under such time pressure, not just to write, but also to manage our other academic responsibilities, keep up with the developments in our fields, and provide service to the university, our professional associations, and the community. One should not forget to put one's own personal live and responsibilities into the mix. In this editorial, we have detailed some thoughts and personal insights on how to "balance like an academic" and to succeed in spite of these forces tugging us all in many directions. It is manageable, though at times difficult, and we are up to the challenge—after all, if it was easy, anyone could do it!

As a final, final observation, we should not forget that although sometimes we are under stress (addressing seemingly hostile reviewer comments, facing piles of grading, attending boring meetings, writing up reports, or adhering to perplexing administrative rules and regulations), we have the world's best job. When we leave that meeting or send off that report, we are free to pursue the research that gives us the wow factor and that we will want to pass us to our students. A senior colleague once said: "in what other line of work can you change career direction at the start of a new semester?" We are blessed with the opportunity to work with students and help them achieve their personal goals. We were inspired by our own senior advisers, impressed by their contributions to the research community, as well as by our many students, and we strive to make a similar contribution ourselves. As a wise person (probably an academic?) once said, "if you like your job, every weekend is seven days long."

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