How to Advocate for … Work–Life Balance

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Describe a time when you had to advocate for work–life balance as a graduate student.

Practicing self-advocacy early on in your graduate career is essential and can leave long-lasting effects on your career. My graduate school experience taught me that advocating for a work–life balance is a part of self-care. During my first semester of graduate school, I was working in a clinical setting that was very short-staffed at the time. I found it difficult to manage work-related responsibilities with the responsibilities we had at school. I had to communicate to my supervisor at work that I would need flexible hours for school since I often found myself rushing after clocking out to beat traffic and attend my class. My supervisor and I were able agree on letting me leave early on the days I had class. From that point on, I was able to consistently communicate with my supervisor whenever I had to attend an afternoon class, participate in a webinar, or attend a meeting that occurred during work hours. Although it was initially difficult to assert myself, overcoming that fear and advocating for myself helped me set a healthy foundation for the rest of my semester.

What are some skills that would be helpful when advocating for and maintaining a healthy work–life balance as a graduate student?

Maintaining a healthy work–life balance takes several soft skills that need to be practiced and purposefully implemented. Learning these skills can be difficult for many students in higher education because there aren’t any formal courses and classes on ways to do so. Time management is one of the pertinent skills in maintaining a healthy work–life balance. Graduate school can become overwhelming from time to time. To avoid burnout, we need to start learning which activities are a priority and which can wait until later. I’ve learned to depend on my planner to guide me through the week; blocking out areas to work and scheduling in self-care helps me follow-through on the commitments I’ve made. Essentially, it is important to learn to work smarter and not harder!

It is also crucial to learn ways to actively communicate with the people around you. Whether it is your colleagues or family, it is important to reach out to people when you feel overwhelmed or need help. Don’t be afraid to use your voice and advocate for yourself when you need to. This is especially pertinent for students who are working while they attend graduate school, because the responsibilities from these two different spheres may be hard to manage at once. For example, I’ve often had to ask my previous bosses about adjusting my hours during the week to take online midterm examination or practicum hours. If you are an incoming graduate student, I would also recommend looking into work-study opportunities that allow you to work on campus alongside faculty that understand and respect your priorities.

Finally, I would tell students to cultivate a hobby that they enjoy doing! I enjoy painting and exercising in my free time, and many students in my cohort participate in hobbies such as baking or surfing. Having a
pleasurable activity that gives you the opportunity to reset can increase your motivation towards maintaining a lifestyle that permits incorporation of those activities.

**What advice would you give individuals just starting their graduate careers on how to advocate for work–life balance?**

I would tell new or incoming graduate students to know when and how to set boundaries. School psychology is an incredible field with several different opportunities to get involved. When first entering graduate programs, it is natural to want to soak in all the various extracurricular activities around you on campus. Since my entire first year of school was held virtually, I was overwhelmed at the amount of on-campus involvement I saw when classes resumed in person. I was determined to take on as many opportunities as possible. However, I soon realized that I was stretching myself thin trying to juggle my personal responsibilities and the roles I took at school. I would advise new students to pace themselves when possible and to always take some time to practice self-care daily. You can’t take care of others without tending to yourself first. I also suggest that new students seek out a mentor, whether that is an older graduate student or faculty mentor. Having someone to guide you through the program can definitely help you become more comfortable with navigating a work–life balance.