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# Life, Career, and Graduate School – Challenge and Opportunity for Students

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Robert J. McDermott, PhD

## ABSTRACT

*Since 2007 I have had the opportunity to teach Writing for Scholarly Publication as part of the Population Health Summer Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health. In a course so brief (five three-hour meetings over a period of 10 days), finding topics through which students can develop their writing talent and complete a publishable paper is an arduous task. Two years ago, students prepared commentaries about why they were (or were not) worried about their future as public health professionals, and four of these short essays were published in the Florida Public Health Review, as they had application for students facing similar concerns in Florida and elsewhere. This year I share some essays from graduate students on the challenge of balancing school, family, career, and other demands of life – another common thread for those pursuing advanced study in public health and related fields.*

*Florida Public Health Review, 2015; 12, 58-59.*

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## BACKGROUND

Since 2007 I have had the opportunity to teach *Writing for Scholarly Publication* as part of the Population Health Summer Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health. This course is the study of the development of skills and opportunities that culminate in publishable works in public health and other health science-related professional journals, area-specific journals, cross-disciplinary journals, and other publications. The emphasis is placed on writing, editing, reviewing, and other skills that culminate in the publication of papers in peer-reviewed professional journals and other publishing outlets. It is considered an important skill-development course for professional growth and survival in the academic world or anyplace where written communication and information dissemination are necessary job-related tasks.

## Intended Audience

At the doctoral level in population health or for the healthcare provider working in a teaching-research environment, or possibly, as a medical resident who is sequentially or concurrently seeking the MPH degree, a course in scholarly writing offers a wide range of benefits. The course is also intended for the advanced MPH or other master's degree-seeking student who is trying to separate "from the pack."

In a course so brief (five three-hour meetings over a period of 10 days), finding topics through which students can develop their writing talent and complete a publishable paper is an arduous task. Two years ago, as one of two course assignments, students prepared commentaries about why they *were* (or *were not*) worried about their future as public health professionals, and four of these short essays were published in the *Florida Public Health Review*, as they had application for students facing similar concerns in Florida and elsewhere (Berrier, 2013; Cuffney, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Shin, 2013).

## Life Balance

Bird (2013) warns us that whereas many people talk about the meaning of a work-life balance, in reality, few have found an acceptable definition of the concept. He further advises us to be cautious about what work-life balance is *not*.

First, work-life balance is not a balancing act where we try to schedule an equal number of hours for each work and personal activity – an objective that is unrealistic and that ultimately shortchanges one or both elements, no doubt leaving us feeling frustrated and unfulfilled.

Second, there is no one-size fits all approach to work-life balance that is applicable to all who try to

achieve it. All individuals have different priorities that are important to them.

According to Bird (2013): ".....at the core of an effective work-life balance definition are two key everyday concepts that are relevant to each of us. They are daily *achievement* and *enjoyment*, ideas almost deceptive in their simplicity." Bird's ideas sparked me to discuss these concepts with some of the graduate students with whom I come into nearly daily contact.

Invariably, graduate students are familiar with the concept of *achievement*. If that were not the case, they probably would not be pursuing yet another degree. When queried, students often will remark that achievement illuminates the path that enables them to get a good job, climb a career ladder, find their dream house, and attain a standard of living that fosters satisfaction, provides them with discretionary money, and gives them a degree of protective comfort from life's perceived threats.

Interestingly, beyond superficial descriptions of having fun and leisure time "partying," graduate students have greater difficulty describing their expectations and goals regarding enjoyment of life – their *joie de vivre*. In fact, some describe the very role of being a student as counterproductive to *enjoyment*.

Bird (2013) writes: "Achievement and enjoyment are the front and back of the coin of value in life. You can't have one without the other, no more than you can have a coin with only one side. Trying to live a one-sided life is why so many 'successful' people are not happy, or not nearly as happy as they should be."

Curious about the extent to which 'life balance' is a construct that surfaces among graduate students, I

asked my summer 2015 scholarly writing students to prepare a 1250-1500-word essay focused on "the challenging dual role of being a [public health] graduate student and having a life outside of school." Some examples of thoughts on this subject from a diverse array of graduate students are reported in this volume of the *Florida Public Health Review*. Whereas these few essays may not represent the breadth of feelings among graduate students with public health affiliations nationwide, they do offer some insights as to how these students address the challenge of graduate school while addressing their own needs, and maintaining connections with work, family, and friends.

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