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Managing the Challenging Dual Role of Being a Population Health Doctoral Student and Having a Life Outside of School – A Commentary

Amber Canto, MPH, RDN

ABSTRACT

Being a successful doctoral student is challenged by life forces such as job, family, and balancing other life commitments. In this paper I comment on these challenges and offer some thoughts on finding a balance that works for me. Keys to meeting this challenge include learning to say "no," finding time for important things, establishing new expectations, acknowledging new and multiple roles establishing boundaries, and utilizing support networks that are available.

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BACKGROUND

My life outside of graduate school largely consists of working full time, and most importantly, and along with my husband, raising my 11-month-old baby boy. My inspiration for charging forward and embracing these multiple roles came from the 2013 national best seller by Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In*, which encourages women to “proceed and be bold.” As such, I continue to develop my public health nutrition career, foster my professional development by completing my doctoral degree, and strive to be the best mother and partner I possibly can be. To maintain my sanity, I have employed a number of strategies to assist in managing the challenging dual role of being a population health doctoral student and having a life outside of school. In what follows, I outline why I intentionally *leaned in* to conquer (and attempt to manage) my personal and professional goals and some of the sacrifices I have had to make along the way.

The political and popular rhetoric devoted to highlighting wage inequality by gender has grown in recent years. As a woman seeking to advance my public health career in academe, I am particularly concerned that female professors earn 78 cents on the dollar compared to their male counterparts. Women are more likely to hold appointments at lower paid faculty ranks compared to men, and men make up a higher proportion of faculty positions at higher-paying institutions (Newman, 2014). Research also shows that women's wages plateau around the childbearing years, further contributing to the gender wage gap (Wilde et al., 2010). In her book, Sandberg (2013) argues that

women unintentionally hold themselves back in their careers; she seeks to empower women to embrace their many roles and to take risks to advance their goals. In acknowledgement of the gender wage gap data, I committed myself to challenging the *status quo* and pursued advancing my professional goals while simultaneously expanding my family.

I learned I was pregnant several weeks prior to submitting my application for the PhD program in the Population Health Sciences Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health. After four years of marriage, my husband and I were ready to expand our family. About the same time, I decided it was time for me to return to graduate school to complete my terminal degree, holding a “now or never” mentality. Completing my PhD was a long time professional and academic goal that I waited to pursue recognizing a desire to travel, bolster my piggy bank, foster my relationship with my husband, and get some real-world public health experience to guide the development of my research interests and goals. So, when I was informed that my expected due date was close to the start of fall semester, I was confronted with mixed feelings as to whether or not to defer submitting my application. I was worried that if known, my pregnancy status would color the reviewer's opinion of my application. I did not want to be perceived as not being committed to the program or incapable of fulfilling graduate student requirements, especially because I was applying as a part-time student. The truth was that I was so

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committed and so serious about starting my PhD that I was willing to challenge myself to handling the hefty load of being a first-time mom, partner to my husband, working full time, and starting a PhD program part time. Whether or not others would see it this way was yet to be determined.

Fortunately, I was accepted into the program and with support from the Department was able to delay my start date until the spring of 2015. This allowed me to take enough (however insufficient) unpaid family leave and transition back to work part time. It also afforded me the opportunity to identify some strategies to manage my new life and roles. Unfortunately, as my infant is beginning to transition into toddlerhood, I have yet to master the ability to survive my multiple roles, and it is entirely possible that I never will. Some days and weeks are better than others, but I have accepted the fact that the ability to manage the challenge of holding multiple roles is more of an iterative process, and for me, is more about how the multiple roles intermingle than an attempt to achieve a misguided expectation of striking perfect balance and alignment.

Keys to Meeting the Challenge

Say “no” and actually mean it. To do this successfully, I analyze my current projects and identify my professional, academic, and personal goals and priorities. In doing so, I feel confident about my decision to deny a request for a programming partnership, request to present, or attend a weekend concert with friends. I now determine more clearly when I should embrace new opportunities that may be supportive of advancing my different priorities. By maintaining a clear focus on what I hope to achieve, I manage my time and commitments more effectively.

Find time for the important things. Managing a detailed calendar and keeping track of to-do lists and deadlines is a practice that I have utilized for years. However, accurately and regularly capturing my appointments and progress on tasks is now more important than ever given my ever-complicated schedule. I establish timelines to complete tasks, regularly reassess my progress, and as needed, adjust the timelines to reflect my current capacity more accurately. Despite my best intentions, I find I am more successful at finding time to meet my academic and professional deadlines, than I am at creating space for personal reinvigoration, such as taking a yoga class or getting a haircut. I would rather let myself down than someone else. As such, I have failed tremendously at being physically active on a regular basis and find my house is not as clean as I might like. Instead of being disappointed in myself, I am working

on letting go and developing a plan to do better next time.

Establish new expectations. As a self-declared neurotic, I inherently strive for perfection on every product I develop. Unfortunately, achieving perfection takes time – time I no longer I have the luxury of spending. As such, I learned to be okay with a slightly lower standard for the work I complete and embrace the notion that sometimes my products may just be “good enough.”

Acknowledge and embrace multiple roles. One of the most salient messages from *Lean In* was to embrace the multiple roles that women play and not to apologize for having priorities outside of work or school. In practice, this means that I do not apologize for needing to arrange my work and school schedule in a manner that provides sufficient time and space for me to express breast milk for my baby. It also signifies occasionally arriving late to class or leaving early from work to accommodate daycare schedules or attend to a sick baby. Fortunately, I am awarded the flexibility in my work schedule to do this, a luxury not all women have.

Establish boundaries. Despite my husband’s best intentions for me to conform, I was never good at leaving work at the office, but I have gotten better. While at home, spending time together as a family and attending to the baby are my top priorities. This means that the electronic devices are put away until after he has gone to sleep. We also try to capitalize on the time at home as an opportunity to prepare a meal together, go for a walk, get some errands done, or to share with extended family and friends. Once the baby is sound asleep, I allow myself to work for a couple of hours to complete readings for class or finish any tasks that I did not get to before leaving the office. However, I try to limit the number of nights that I do this, recognizing that my partner and I also need time to nurture our relationship.

Recognize and utilize support networks. My partner is my most important source of support. Without him, my ability to manage the multiple roles I hold would be much more challenging. With his assistance, I have learned that it is okay to ask for help from others. He encourages me when I am frustrated by feeling limited in time to develop a perfect product and helps me find space in my day for a yoga class. He also reminds me of the importance of establishing and maintaining boundaries. Networking with other part-time students and full-time working moms has been helpful. It is comforting to know that there are others in a similar position.

To proceed in achieving my academic, professional and personal goals, I have had to seek

strategies to manage my multiple roles on a day-to-day basis. I have embraced the contributions each of these roles plays in contributing to realizing my full potential. By *leaning in* to these multiple roles, I hope to inspire other women to battle gender inequalities in the workforce and in academe.

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