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The Simultaneous, Incompatible Life of a Doctoral Student

Amitha Domalpally, MD

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 categorizing the "chaos," avoiding role contagion, and utilizing the support of a partner to help balance out the stress of school.

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BACKGROUND

The traditional linear model of life follows an educational phase followed by a professional phase interlaced with a family life. The ever-popular board game 'Life' lays out this linear model of college to retirement very well. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 26% of full-time graduate students and 60% of part-time graduate students are over 30 years old (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Data compiled at Cornell University revealed that 25% of graduate students were married (Price, 2005). So, how does a doctoral student navigate the web of conflicting roles of student, employee, spouse, and possibly, a parent? I have been doing the multi-role tango for about three years now and have learned a few tricks. I am by no means an expert on the floor but am excited to share my routine.

Categorize Chaos

One of the key survival rules is to categorize chaos. Not everybody is born with the skills of organizing, but most people know the basics. Imagine a situation where you have limited closet space that can fit in 50 clothes hangers but you own about a hundred pieces of clothing. It makes logical sense to sort, prioritize, discard, organize, and repeat. How do we apply this to life outside school?

There are three essential parts to life outside of school (at least for me) – work, family, and a social network. These form my "must haves." There are a limited number of sub-units within each of these categories that can fit the leftover hours in a day. The solution is to sort and prioritize these sub-units to either reduce them or make them overlap. It is

important to understand and accept that this approach will have a cost to it. I have reduced my contribution at work by limiting the amount of travel that I do. This affects networking and further progress of my career. I do not attend soccer practice for my kids but go for the game and miss out on the parent networking. Cutting back is a healthier alternative to giving up completely, whether it is for work, or for your social life. The doctoral degree has a finite timespan, and once that is done, it is time for the rest of the activities to grow. If you completely cut back on a hobby or your social life, you will be estranged when the wonderful world of post-graduation welcomes you.

Overlapping of tasks is also an economical way of managing time. With two kids in elementary school, I have developed family homework time when the three of us sit together and do our homework. Because of the expectation of setting an example for the kids, I put on my 'focused' expression and stay glued to my chair until I am done, which results in a win-win situation. The constant 'gibberish' from the kids does distract me but it is a small trade-off. Social networking can happen while I am on the bleachers cheering at the soccer game. Of course, I run the risk of missing that awesome kick.

Role Contagion

The second key survival tip is to make every minute count. The doctoral degree is not an infinite phase of your life. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Time is a precious commodity while in school, so it is essential to be in the moment. I was very proud of my multi-tasking skills – being able to take care of

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work email during class, complete assignments during official meetings where my presence was needed more than participation, and so on. Last spring, I took a course where the professor insisted on a no digital device in class policy. This experience of actually listening to a lecture and doing nothing else gave me a whole new perspective on multi-tasking. I realized that what I was doing was the equivalent of snacking all day instead of sitting down for a complete meal at the dining table. The latter is far superior in terms of both satiety and overall health. I had never understood the concept of role contagion until this experience. Whereas multi-tasking is an essential skill to know, it is also important to know when not to exercise it.

The Bicycle

The final key survival tip is to gain your partner's support. Even if you are an expert unicyclist, graduate school with a family, especially with kids, requires that your spouse play an essential role. The importance of partners' support cannot be understated and should ideally be first on the list, even before you sign up for school. No matter how brilliant you are, support from

your partner can really help you breeze through school. There are times when every other aspect of your life has to wait and all your attention has to be on school. The partner will need to step up and take over everything.

There are many blogs and websites that advise doctoral students on coursework, advice on advisors, thesis defense, and so on. The lifespan as a student is a critical period but is short-lived; your career, your family, your friends, and your hobbies are what continue with you. A healthy life outside of school will help balance out the stress of school.

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