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# The Challenging Dual Role of Being a DVM/Public Health Student and Having a Life – A Commentary

Nailah S. Smith, DVM

## ABSTRACT

*Being a successful graduate 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 committing to certain values, defining the essentials in life, and recognizing personal boundaries.*

*Florida Public Health Review, 2015; 12, 65-66.*

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## BACKGROUND

People often feel that there must be an extreme compromise of one's personal life to thrive in academia. They imagine the mad scientist pouring over his or her books trying to come up with the next greatest concoction with no regard for the outside world. To some extent, our work is a sought-after obsession. It is what separates the successful from the mediocre. However, it is also what separates the well-balanced from the overextended. Realistically, people need leisure and down time. So, how does one work that into a culture obsessed with success?

Graduate students face a challenge of trying to maintain balance while also succeeding in their respective arena. It is difficult to justify taking vacation or even a day off when surrounded by a culture that celebrates making sacrifices for the benefit of our work. I saw this myself when I first began my graduate studies. I was surrounded by classmates who were talking to their families less, studying more, and not looking very happy. I realized that if I just went with the flow, I would become another in a long list of burned out graduate students. To prevent this from happening to me, I had to assess my personal values and goals for graduate school. What sacrifices would I be willing to make, both in my professional and personal lives, so that I could obtain the seemingly impossible dream of a well-balanced life in graduate school?

## Values

One value to which I wished to commit during my graduate school career was always making time for family. I wanted to make this a reality by being

available whenever someone in my family called or texted me. This was feasible for me because I have a small but close immediate family who I knew understood the rigors of my program. We were able to catch up with weekly phone calls or Skype sessions during which I could talk to more than one person at a time. Other forms of communication were encouraged as well, such as email, the occasional letter or, my favorite, the care package. Keeping in contact with my family and hearing their positive messages for me helped me to have the energy needed to face the rigors of graduate school. I had a great reward for a couple of hours a week of well-spent family time.

Another value that was important to me was maintaining my friendships. Much in the same way that I wanted to be available to my family, I wanted to be available to my friends. Many of my friends are also in graduate school and are wonderful to commiserate with during the tough times of our programs. Whereas support from family is nice, it is rewarding to have friends that can empathize with your current struggles. It is also rewarding to be a source of comfort for friends that are in need of encouraging words and helpful tips.

My friends also keep me involved in extra-curricular activities (other than Netflix). We motivate each other to explore one another's interests whether that be going to a concert, watching a new movie, taking dance lessons, or hiking. I have had so many experiences that, if left to my own devices, would have never happened without my group of friends. One notable experience came at the end of my third year of school. We had one week of vacation before clinics

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*Florida Public Health Review, 12, 65-66.*

65

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began and wanted to do something together before we were all spilt up in clinics. I joked that I always wanted to go to Montreal, Quebec and somehow the joke evolved into an actual road trip to Canada with my friends!

Although making time for family and friends throughout my graduate career has at times come at the expense of studying I can say honestly that I have never regretted making family and friends a priority. When I look back at my graduate career, I find that the times that prioritized studying over family and friends resulted in me actually studying less than the times I prioritized family and friends over studying. Perhaps this is because, though I had less time to study, I used that time more wisely. For some reason, it never failed that given more time to study I would procrastinate more. I ended up learning that I function more efficiently under a bit of self-imposed pressure and time constraints than I do when I have plenty of time.

### Essentials

Once my values were assessed I had to think about my essentials in life. Like most people, I require food and sleep. There are many guidelines for graduate students about eating healthy, getting enough sleep, and maintaining a pristine work environment. I looked at those guidelines as being a bit unrealistic. It would be wonderful to get 8-10 hours of sleep each night as a graduate student, but in reality, this can only happen every so often. I had to learn by trial and error what worked for me, my budget, and the rigors of my program.

One of the most important essentials for me was, and will always be, food. I consider myself a bit of a gourmand, which is a nice way of saying a "glutton." During my undergraduate career, I had strict limitations to when I had access to food. I lived on campus and did not have a car or much spending money so grocery trips were rare. I was at the mercy of the campus cafeteria's menu and its limited hours. Once in graduate school, I gained a lot more control over my diet. I had my own kitchen, car, and a bit more spending money (thanks student loans!). The onus was now upon me to plan and create well-balanced and affordable meals for myself. This proved to be a steeper learning curve than I thought. One of the things that helped me navigate my role as chief

nutritionist for myself was the purchase of a book with recipes and advice about how to plan meals while on a budget. I still struggle with planning my meals as I can be indecisive about what I want to eat but I know that it can be done and it is satisfying when done correctly.

Another essential that I find invaluable is sleep. I am always looking for ways to incorporate more sleep into my life. I found that the best way to implement sleep is to stick to a realistic schedule as well as possible. This schedule was disrupted when I entered the unpredictable world of my clinical year. On call hours and late admissions were always messing with my plan! Unfortunately, I could not always go home at 9:00 pm and go straight to sleep. I had to review information for my cases coming in the next day and be prepared to wake up early to handle in-patients. So, how did I sleep? I tried to do as much paperwork as possible during the day if I had any down time. If some aspect of paperwork was left undone I learned to forgive myself and respect my limits. I understood that I would not be at my best if I did not, at some point, get sleep. I also carefully considered how my lack of sleep would affect my patient and prioritized their care over my need to complete absolutely everything.

### Conclusion

In the end, recognizing my own boundaries and respecting them is a key aspect of ensuring that I maintain a life outside of graduate school. I tend to take the time to assess where I am at a given time and thinking about if what I am currently doing is promoting my happiness and well-being. Sometimes the answer is "no" and I have to take a step back to assess my situation and decide what I can change and what is out of my control to manage better. By finding a balance that works and realizing that there is no one formula for everyone, the graduate experience can be well-rounded (and even) enjoyable!

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