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The Challenging Dual Role of Being a Public Health Professional Degree-Seeking Student and Having a Life Outside of School – A Commentary

Kristen L. Brewer, MPA, MS

ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a continuing series of papers describing the experiences of students as they contend with academic studies, marriage and family, job-related responsibilities, and other activities that compete with being a full-time student. In this paper, the author discusses “multi-tasking,” the intellectual challenges of school, the all-consuming nature of advanced education, and the irony of personal, social, and health sacrifices one makes while seeking a public health degree – asking rhetorically, “Is it worth it?”

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Today’s culture of multi-tasking, “I can have it all” mentality has perhaps led some of us to believe that seeking a public health professional degree, while continuing with our adult lives, is not only a good idea, but a completely realistic idea. We assure ourselves, as well as our partners and children and family and friends and pets, we will manage to still be active in the lives we have cultivated, while expanding our knowledge and working towards more opportunities. “It will be worth it in a few years!” we state emphatically, nodding our heads and brushing aside any thoughts or comments regarding the specifics of “how” this will be done. We want to make the world a healthier place, and this PhD will be the flag we wave as we do so. What we fail to realize, or more likely, what we deny about the reality of the situation, is that we simply had no idea what we would face in the nonstop battle of balancing a PhD in Public Health and having a life outside of school.

A doctoral program, regardless of the discipline, is intellectually challenging, as it should be. These students are learning in-depth content in all their classes. There is no such thing as an “easy A” at this level and every class requires careful thought, research, preparation, and discussions. A PhD student is constantly thinking, and the act of constantly thinking is exhausting. After a day of reading, thinking about what we have read, discussing what we have read, and writing about what we have read, we get to

go home. However, home is no longer the place we go to unwind and relax. It is now also the place where we continue to read, study, and write. Except now, unlike during our carefree undergraduate days, many of us have our partners/children/pets vying for our attention. Even the most supportive partner is bound to begin to feel neglected after days of being asked to turn the television down and to please do the dishes and laundry, so you can continue to study, but also have clean jeans to wear to class tomorrow. “But, it will be worth it in a few years!”, you remind him. (Forget trying to explain it to your dogs, just let them curl up at your feet while you continue to type away on one of your current research projects).

A doctoral program is, in a word, consuming. When the weekend comes, we shed our reading glasses, dissertations, class assignments, and emails and attempt to acclimate back into society, if only for the briefest of time. We make plans with family and friends and try to catch up on what is going on in their lives. They have new jobs, new houses, new babies, vacations, and we ask follow-up questions and live vicariously through them. They talk about their recent weekend getaway to some city where they slept in, caught the local sights, cuisine, and craft beverages, and our thoughts drift jealously to wonder when we will be able to rejoin the rest of society and enjoy these activities again. In return, they ask us how school is going and before we know it, we are leaned in,

passionately discussing a variety of health education topics and specific articles we read that support our dissertation topic, while our family members' or friends' eyes begin to glaze over as they nod politely and try and ask questions. We continue to chat with those around us and try and relax, but now we are thinking about how much work we have piled up and anxiety sets in. "Why am I drinking and playing games when there is research to be done?" we think to ourselves, and sometimes aloud to whomever is listening.

A PhD in Public Health is particularly interesting, in that these students are acutely aware of how these factors affect their overall health. Our field deals with increasing the quality of life, wellness, and promoting an overall healthy lifestyle. Not an easy task for anyone in general, but adding to this challenge, as doctoral students, we seem to have fewer hours in our days than others. I have no empirical evidence to support this theory; however, I am certain it is a sound one, nonetheless. We preach the importance of reducing stress and improving mental health to any congregation who will listen, yet our sermons reek of hypocrisy as we let our own stressors build up and chip away at our own mental health. "As long as I get at least 5 hours of sleep tonight, I will be fine," we kid ourselves as we continue to scroll through Google Scholar well into the late hours of the night, terrified that a new study will have come out that now deems our dissertation unnecessary and unpublishable. We know it is not fine. We actually teach others how the average body needs 8 hours of sleep each night or it will begin to turn on us, functionally. We push aside the public health focused conscious voice in our heads telling us that "lack of sleep leads to reduced immunity, daytime drowsiness, attention lapses, poor memory, and poor cognitive ability" (Donatelle, 2016) and we keep on, hoping we can successfully defend our dissertation and receive our diploma before our bodies are no longer the functioning vessels we have come to take for granted.

Oh, and never mind the burden of attempting to be a role model and advocate for the field. In addition to the lectures on stress and mental health, we are also cognizant of the importance of proper nutrition and adequate levels of exercise. Therefore, sometime in between our classes, research, homework, trying to have a social life, reducing stress, and increasing sleep, we must find time to eat well and work out. This means, we now must take some of our precious little time to go grocery shopping for healthy, fresh food that then must be cooked and prepared in advance for lunches and dinners, because there is no way we will be cooking each meal separately. Likely, we will be shoveling chicken and quinoa in our mouths while clacking away on our laptops. Personally, I never

know where I will find carrots, apples, and nuts that I have stashed in my desk, car, and backpack. Who knows when I will be able to sit down and eat a full, hot meal like a civilized adult? Additionally, exercising becomes a race. It does not matter if you are a runner, you are now racing against the clock. Thirty minutes at random times on random days to squeeze in some form of physical activity is a personal challenge. Running to and from class and the library, unfortunately does not quite count as "cardio," so to the student recreation center we go. We run while reading articles or grading student papers on a table, then a quick circuit for strength training to maximize time by working multiple muscle groups at the same time. Then, we waltz into our next class post-workout, and much to the chagrin of our cohort's sense of smell. We found time to work out, but we could not quite manage the time for an immediate shower.

I know I am not alone in this. Although there is little literature on this topic, as most studies focus on the undergraduate population, a Clemson University study by Martinez et. al., looked at this elusive balance of "having it all" in full-time doctoral students. The authors discuss issues that arise in attempting to balance school-work-life at this level. The students in this qualitative study were all recipients of graduate assistantships, and this was the "work" aspect of the study. The participants discuss the daily challenges they face in time management, prioritizing, seeking well-being, finding personal time, finding social and financial support, and making trade-offs (Martinez, et. al., 2013). As a graduate assistant who teaches three sections of undergraduate classes, I can attest that this adds another spinning plate to our collection. We want to enrich the lessons of the classes we teach and impart our knowledge and passion to the next generation of students. This desire is coupled by the financial support that is, quite honestly, necessary for many to afford a Ph.D. program, which tends to make students prioritize this aspect above many of the others. Someone must pay the bills, right?

This skillful balancing act is difficult. It takes dedication, time management, prioritizing, and support (financial, social, institutional, etc.). There is a reason that, although the United States produces the majority of doctoral degrees (Wendler et al., 2010), the attrition rate is atrocious. In fact, only about 50% of students enrolled in a doctoral program successfully complete their program (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Programs are more a test of endurance and will than intelligence and knowledge.

But why do we do this, you may ask after reading all this. Why do we put ourselves through this self-inflicted test of endurance? Because it will be worth it in a few years! When we have our newly printed certificate, declaring us as a "Doctor of Philosophy,"

and we put it and ourselves to work, we will be doing work that matters. Discovering origins of diseases, researching best practices for treatments in a variety of areas, and helping people to lead longer, higher quality lives – it will be worth it. When we no longer have to

worry about food deserts, access to health care, vaccinations, mental health stigmas, and socio-economic status impacting health, it will absolutely be worth it.

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