

# Being a Balanced Teacher

M. V. Dodson

Washington State University  
Pullman, WA 99164-6310

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## Abstract

When I became a new assistant professor, some fifteen years ago, I thought I had finally passed the last roadblock in my career. How naive could I be? I soon learned that being in a fifty-five / forty-five percent research and teaching position did not represent the entire job actually expected of me. I thought my main responsibility was to generate considerable amounts of research support and publish volumes of high quality research papers, with teaching and advising being nuisance duties everyone had to perform. However, I was informed that, in addition to teaching and research, I was also expected to perform considerable service to my department, local community and / or to a scientific affiliation. After nearly five years of fourteen to sixteen hour days, working weekends, never getting the job finished, and experiencing poor health, I realized that my main academic duty was to be a teacher. All of the work-related anxiety that I experienced as a junior faculty member was removed when I learned to approach my daily duties as if I was simply teaching different audiences. By doing so, I regained the balance in my life, actually became more productive and collegial, and within one year acquired tenure and promotion. I offer this personal account so that someone just beginning his/her career will learn from my mistakes and find success and satisfaction in an academic environment.

## Introduction

I was hired as a junior faculty member in 1985 in the Department of Animal Sciences at Washington State University (WSU) on a fifty-five percent research / forty-five percent teaching appointment, with an unspoken expectation of performing service to my department, community and / or scientific affiliation. I received a minimal amount of start-up funds to equip my laboratory and I was expected to teach classes outside my area of expertise. Looming over my head, as a new university faculty member, was the stress of doing what was perceived to be correct in the eyes of those senior faculty members who would eventually evaluate me for tenure / promotion to associate professor. The continuous pressure of the job and my own personal idealist expectations made it impossible for me to achieve excellence in all areas simultaneously. Performance stress led me to become a workaholic. Fourteen and sixteen hour days, working on the weekends and holidays and chasing deadlines became the norm for

me for years. Over time I became very unbalanced in my approach to academia in a university setting. Long gone was any sense of creativity I once had. Also gone were my efficiency, productivity and persistence. I was burned-out. The focus of this paper is not for me to dwell on the negative aspects of my experience in academia but to put the duties of a faculty member into a "teacher" perspective.

## Overall Attitude Adjustment

Three steps were required in order for me to regain my academic balance. I found that I needed to change my attitude, become selfish and let my accomplishments speak for themselves. The first major step was to change my attitude about my job. Instead of working to meet everyone else's expectations, I worked at my own pace to meet my own expectations. Initially, I slowed down and focused on only a few goals in research, teaching and service. Rather than work long (rather nonproductive) hours each day, I tried to work only an eight to nine hour work shift Monday through Friday. While at work during the shortened day, I focused on productive efforts and kept on track. Interestingly, the time away from the job allowed me to regain some of my creativity, and I became more efficient while at work, subsequently getting more accomplished.

The second step in changing my attitude was to become a bit selfish. When I first came to the university I wanted to please the senior faculty so that I could be tenured and promoted. I worked hard, but did not seem to be appreciated. Within four to five years, I gradually realized that my efforts as a junior faculty member were just as important as those of the rest of the faculty. As such, I began to operate under the idea that if I developed a viable program, and if the university did not want this program and did not offer me tenure at the sixth year, then I would simply take my program to another institution.

The third step that I incorporated for regaining by balance was to "speak with history." In other words, I tried to let my accomplishments speak for me, rather than me telling others about all of the wonderful work that I was doing. If I published a paper that I thought particularly good, for example, instead of telling departmental faculty about it, I let them hear about it through word of mouth - from others outside the department. The same could be said about my teaching. Rather than personally telling everyone how wonderful my new class was, I let the faculty learn through the rise in student numbers that occurred after I taught the class a few times.

These three steps have served me well over the past ten to thirteen years and have opened up numerous chances for collaboration, initiating new classes or developing ideas into service opportunities. Perhaps they would not work for anyone else, or perhaps there are other steps just as workable. However, any step on make to adjust, without compromising their integrity, is commendable.

### **Outside Influences**

Numerous distractions occurred during my four to five years turn-around period that could have thrown me right back into a state of imbalance. My college acquired a new Dean, who was quick to place different expectations on each faculty member's position description. Every year during my residence at WSU, my department has experienced a major budget cut, which has decimated the morale and continuity of the overall department.

Department unity was also askew when I had three department chairs come and go within only a few years' time. For a period of (at least) five years, position stability was precarious. During all of this time, however, I continued to evolve. Focusing on my own development was sufficiently rewarding and enabled me to be productive regardless of unstable circumstances. In fact, within only one to two years time and in spite of all of the distractions, I was eager to get to work and initiate my day's activities.

### **Approach to Balanced Research Activities**

My first solution to resolving the pressure of conducting research was to slow down. Instead of trying to always have a grant proposal in the works. I skipped one cycle and used the time to write papers. Research activities include more than writing papers solely based on data derived from the laboratory and grant proposals to fund the ongoing projects. I began to branch out and write review papers on different aspects of my research field and perspective papers on specific scientific topics. My early attempts were to share some of my thoughts with other scientists who might be similarly frustrated. Writing these papers at first consumed considerable time.

I also had to fight back the guilt I felt about not spending more time generating grant proposals when working on the first few papers. However, after the first "non-data" paper was published, I had an idea about how to divide my time between writing these types of papers and writing grants. After the third review / perspective paper was submitted, I started to feel quite differently and a bit more creative about my productivity. I began to think about various aspects of my scientific duties, and when I felt there was something I needed to address by writing a small paper and sharing my ideas with others, I did it. I have subsequently written papers to numerous journals about a variety of topics.

A second solution to gaining balance in a research program is to do what you believe is right for you. For example, in many of my research proposals I asked for support to conduct research that was new and innovative. I was not prepared for comments like "no one could ever perform this research, because it is too tedious." As such, when the grant funding slowed, I simply continued on the same path, but slower. Now, over ten years later, my laboratory has built a successful *in vitro* system, which has produced large amounts of "impossible" data. This system could never have been a working reality if I had not continued to believe in myself and in my expertise of my laboratory personnel.

A third solution to gaining balance in research activities was for me not to be so hard on myself. When I became a new faculty member I was very self critical and took everything personally. If I had a grant proposal or scientific paper rejected, it took me weeks to get over depressed feelings. However, I gained confidence in my abilities by slowing down, getting a number of small projects finished and rewarding myself for my accomplishments—rather than dwelling on the negative. As more projects were completed, I removed more pressure from myself and became more productive in my research efforts.

A fourth solution, perhaps the one that really helped me the most, was to share my evolution with others. For example, when writing papers with respect to laboratory business, I did not assume senior authorship. Rather, it became my policy to have the students, technicians or post-docs assume the senior position on papers, even though I had a major influence on every aspect of the project. By allowing others to gain recognition, my laboratory personnel soon acquired "can-do" attitudes and high morale, which only made my efforts that much more productive.

### **Approach to Balanced Teaching Activities**

Teaching in formal classrooms and advising students in my office were chores I resented as a new faculty member since they took time away from what I considered to be more important items such as research. After all, research was one of the main areas on which I was to be judged for tenure. To acquire some balance between my research and teaching responsibilities, I had to make some big changes in my schedule. First, I asked not to teach topics that were far outside my specialty but rather to develop new classes within my field of expertise. Such classes made me feel more comfortable about the subject matter and could draw new students into them. Over the course of the next few years I developed two undergraduate classes, Animal Growth and Skeletal Muscle Physiology. I relaxed and began to have fun teaching. In addition, I began to relax as an advisor. I became interested in students as individuals, rather than considering them

nuisances. I learned that advising students can be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching and that being an effective advisor requires hard work and a time commitment that goes far beyond signing the advisory form.

At the same time that I was changing my attitudes about teaching and advising, I began to have different thoughts about the laboratory. I began to think about the real goals I should strive for (that would make me happy over the course of a career), and I relaxed my stance on strict utilization of the laboratory. Instead of closing off my laboratory to anything but my main line research efforts, I began to allow undergraduate students into my laboratory to work on a wide range of undergraduate research problems. I also accepted graduate students from other disciplines, who might want to apply my skills to their system / animal. Finally, I began to write my papers, grants, reports and lectures in a style that was more informative and had feeling, rather than in the concise scientific style I had used up to that point. Writing in this manner helped me expand my writings to other audiences and provided me with an added avenue / conduit for publishing.

### **Approach to Balance Service Activities**

Developing a balance in the conduct of service activities was the hardest thing that I ever did in my academic career. For the most part, my contract did not define this category but rather implied I should strive to collegial. The solution to my performing significant service was achieved almost by accident. While conducting a library search for my research program, I seriously studied the Notice to Authors of numerous journals in which I had previously published papers. Nearly every one of them was accepting papers in a slightly different area than that with which I was familiar. For example, some cell biology journals were accepting only papers with dealing with molecular biology techniques. I had to look at numerous journals to find one that would publish the type of data generated by my laboratory.

Because teaching scientists about my field of study or sharing ideas with them about other topics was becoming very important to me, I decided I needed to become involved in helping to shape the format / content of specific journals that had not yet changed their focus. I soon found myself on the editorial boards of numerous journals. I helped start a new journal in the muscle field, and I developed a new editorial section for a different journal. Within four years, I become associate editor of three journals and section editor of another. During 1994-1998, I tried to support these journals by submitting papers to them. My service activities evolved out of necessity, and I have slowly established ties to a diverse group of publications. Activities that satisfy my departmental requirement for conducting substantial service now seem like second nature to me.

### **Conclusion**

Conduct of competitive research and the hunt for the next research dollar leave little time for publication of research papers, which is essential for the new faculty member to document progress. This situation is exacerbated by peer pressure to secure a grant, meet time deadlines and accommodate other diversions / commitments. Teaching activities also consume much of the time of new faculty members, as does providing service to the department, university or a scientific discipline. Therefore, even though a faculty member might be an excellent bench-top scientist, he will soon learn that being in the laboratory on a daily basis is either taboo or impossible. Creativity is a nebulous item. In order to be a successful faculty member, one must be creative enough to develop new ideas. However, one quickly loses his creativity when continually stressed. Is there a way to beat the stress? Yes! If one approaches research, teaching and service as if he were simply teaching different audiences in a scholarly manner, he will be personally satisfied at the end of the day, or at the end of his balanced career.

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