

Balancing Leadership and Life

 insidehighered.com/advice/2017/03/09/how-administrators-can-be-both-academic-leaders-and-find-time-themselves-essay

Many senior faculty members [take on an administrative position](#), serving as chair of their department, undergraduate or graduate program director, or in upper administrative levels outside the department. Academic leaders step up for many reasons, including because they believe they can make a [positive difference](#). Yet academic leadership comes with substantial challenges.

Such administrators often find themselves exhausted as they burn the candle at both ends. Leading is not only time-consuming but also unpredictable. Concerns, requests and demands come from every side -- students, staff members, faculty members -- and from administrators above them. Finding balance as an academic leader may seem impossible. As one chair told us, "My balance is that I'll be done chairing after three years, so I'm just trying to ride this out."

Being a responsive administrator can come at the expense of health, travel and time with friends and family. Exhausted and stressed administrators lack the energy and optimism necessary to deal proactively with problems. Maintaining balance as an administrator, then, requires setting limits.

[Perfectionism](#) and control are maladaptive -- leading to exhaustion, distress and poor decisions. [Work-life balance](#) -- including working a reasonable number of hours each week, getting exercise, having leisure time and taking vacations -- is consistently linked to positive outcomes, including lower turnover, better decision making, improved performance and greater commitment to the workplace. [One study](#) finds that, across almost 10,000 managers, those with higher levels of work-life balance rated higher in career advancement potential than managers with lower levels of work-life balance.

One administrator we know explained that if President [Barack Obama](#) could make time to have dinner with his family and exercise for 45 minutes every day, he should be able to do the same. Obama's logic -- that exercise made him productive, and time with family and friends gave him perspective -- also applies to academic leaders. You don't have to choose between being an effective leader and a happy, healthy person. The most effective leaders set limits and seek balance. To do so, they do the following.

Delegate. The best leaders learn how to delegate duties, making good decisions about the tasks that truly need their attention. If you delegate the activities you like least or have the least aptitude for, you automatically become a [better leader](#).

One chair pointed out the need for an associate chair, one who is a "trusted confidant ... to peel off some discrete tasks," while others suggest relying on past chairs or executive committees to manage certain tasks. Rather than feeling that you must manage everything, think creatively about how to make the job doable -- and in ways that allow you the time to handle the responsibilities you can do well.

Schedule face time. When leading, it is important to engage face-to-face with those you lead. Set time in your schedule for in-person discussions, perhaps using a [scheduling tool](#) that allows people to book your time. Do not handle complex matters over email. Set up phone calls or in-person meetings to deal with any conflicts.

One of the stresses of leading is the sense that you have no time to meet with co-workers, because you have too much to do. Yet spending time together helps ensure smooth communication and builds trust. That is why delegating tasks is so vital to good leadership. If chairs, for example, only see faculty members in adversarial situations, relationships fray and distrust and rumors and bad feelings grow -- producing a corrosive effect on the workplace. Such conditions often lead to *more* work for academic leaders.

Actively engaging is an investment. Regular meetings, coffees or lunches that are aimed at building or maintaining

relationships rather than solving a specific issue are key. Without open communication flows, problems tend to snowball. Spending one-on-one time with those you lead helps limit some of the most challenging situations that you will face as an administrative leader.

Set clear expectations about when you are available. While connecting with those whom you lead is important, the best leaders also set clear expectations about when they are available. While it may be required in an emergency, operating as if everyday concerns and issues require immediate response leads to burnout. In addition, limits help model and reinforce balanced behavior in the people around you.

For example, making clear when you generally will be in your office can help colleagues, staff members and students know how and when to meet with you. Setting up monthly or biweekly meetings at the beginning of each term helps contain the need for constant mini meetings. You can also cancel scheduled meetings if there is nothing to discuss on the agenda (assuming all meeting participants have had a chance to contribute to that agenda).

Email is pernicious, because rather than clocking out and returning replenished the next workday, many administrators find themselves haunted by email. As one former chair said, “I basically felt ‘on’ 24-7 for the three years [I chaired],” in part because high-level administrators would email “early Sunday morning, Christmas Eve, Easter morning (all these things happened),” with important information or requests.

As we have suggested [before](#), it is crucial to develop an email strategy. Reading and responding to email only at prescribed hours during the day (say, 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. or 4 p.m. to 5 p.m.) can help take you off the email treadmill and give you a stronger sense of agency over your time. Setting people’s expectations of when you will respond to email -- just as you might on a syllabus -- can help alleviate the anxiety around frequently checking email. Giving staff members an alternate way to reach you in an emergency (e.g., your cell phone number) can help assure you that all is well.

Organize your schedule. While being an administrative leader may be a major commitment, many positions still require leaders to engage in teaching, advising and research work. Rather than allowing your leadership work to bleed into every moment of the day, scheduling blocks into your calendar helps clarify and support your priorities.

Only teaching courses that you know well, for example, may help keep you on track. As one leader said, “It’s possible to teach and to research while chair -- there just has to be some acceptance of a slower pace.” Leisure time and exercise are also important to include in your calendar. Exercise helps you maintain not only physical but also [mental and emotional health](#). Spending time with friends and family can provide an important sense of perspective that makes it easier to return to work.

Some leaders suggest scheduling research time, for example, for before or after staff members are at work. Others suggest working from home or another location certain days to avoid unexpected interruptions. Assert power over your time by sticking to your scheduled blocks as much as possible. As one leader told us, “During the years I was a dean, I often heard from my assistant that someone had to see me urgently. Looking at my fully booked calendar, I’d say, ‘Tell them I can meet them at 5 p.m.’ Invariably, the issue became less urgent when the timing was inconvenient.”

Listen to criticism, but don’t take it personally. As a leader, you will often hear criticism about decisions you have made or processes you have in place. It is natural to feel defensive when you are criticized, but remember that it is almost a structural obligation for faculty members and students to be suspicious of administrators. Do not expect to be beloved.

That said, do not tune out criticism. Use the critique to design better systems and approaches. Rather than seeing criticism as an attack on you personally (which is rarely is), try to mine it for advice on how to lead and communicate more effectively. That will make everyone happier, and your job easier.

Of course, at times, people do attack you personally. Face-to-face conversation, perhaps with mediators or

supervisors, can help de-escalate such situations. Developing a network of people in positions similar to yours also may allow you to get support from those who have faced similar issues. Spending time talking with friends outside work -- without breaking confidentiality, of course -- can also help you gain perspective about tense situations. As one academic leader notes, therapy can also be beneficial: “There are a lot of demands for emotional management, and a therapist/coach helps.”

Schedule holidays and vacations and take them. Many academic leaders feel they must work year in and year out. You should schedule and take vacations, whether or not they are allotted vacation days. That might mean taking weeks off during the summer or winter break and not working on holidays. Some leaders told us they schedule time off to avoid events they do not enjoy.

Holidays play an important role in rejuvenating and destressing us. Returning from vacation, your head is clearer and you are more productive. Yet many leaders fear taking vacations, often due to email-induced [stress](#). A number of academic leaders told us that they couldn’t stop reading emails, due to worrying about the deluge of messages awaiting them. We recommend [setting an autoreply](#) that makes clear how long you will be away and then scheduling a cushion around your break, so that your first day back is entirely focused on “cleaning up” your email.

Another issue rests on how the immediate work that needs doing will be covered. But just as with delegating regular tasks, you can find people to cover for you during vacations. A former chair, for example, may help cover for you, knowing both how important breaks are and how to manage the job. Covering can also help train the next leader, allowing them to see some of the day-to-day aspects of the job. Avoid daily email contact, which limits the positive benefits of vacation.

It is possible for academic leaders to set limits and seek balance. [Mindfulness](#) can help avoid [burnout](#), which includes exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. Rather than a zero sum between being a good leader and taking care of yourself, trust that taking care of yourself makes you a better leader.