American Academy of Religion
Work/Life Balance Focus Groups

Table of Contents

Invitation to Work/Life Balance Focus Groups
Dear Colleagues,

The Committee on the Status of Women of the American Academy of Religion would like to invite you to participate in an examination of issues surrounding work/life balance. The committee is planning to develop a guide on this subject and is hoping that small groups all over the U.S. might meet to generate ideas about the topics and challenges that such a guide should cover and the potential solutions that it might lay out.

Work/life balance has emerged repeatedly as a concern at the annual mentoring lunches and at SWP special topics forums. Many things prevent women at all stages of academic life from achieving a satisfactory balance between earning a living and fulfilling other commitments and responsibilities, including care for self, children, elders, and extended family members. Some women face special challenges including disabilities and chronic health problems. Students and faculty struggle with finding balance even as they try to keep up with institutional expectations for professional progress. Poorly paid and professionally insecure adjuncts face additional difficulties. Many women in the academy seek some semblance of balance through informal and private rather than formal structures of support.

SWP would like to provide more resources to both graduate students and faculty members by developing an on-line guide on work/life balance which would address three dimensions of the issue: a) strategies for self-care and wellness for individuals at all stages of their careers, b) institutional policies and practices that support balanced lives, and c) value questions, especially vital for us as scholars of religion, raised by the concept of "a balanced life."

Our goal in gathering women in focus groups is to begin an informal, constructive conversation about what exactly hinders women from achieving work/life balance, whether such balance is possible, and what conditions facilitate healthy balance. Our SWP committee has already hosted three small focus groups, and more information about our work and summaries of the discussions may be found at http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Committees/Status_of_Women_in_the_Profession/default.asp. We would like to invite others throughout the U.S. to also hold small, informal focus groups and share with us the ideas that emerge either through a formal write-up that can be posted to our website or through contacting one of the members of SWP. Participants in our first groups found that—quite part from what may come out of them—it has been personally useful to share experiences and strategies and develop relationships with colleagues. SWP will review all ideas shared with us as a starting point to develop foci for the on-line manual.

Since issues of balance affect everyone, we expect that the guide will be useful to all faculty members, women and men. We also expect that the values focus of the guide should be interesting to people beyond religious studies. Indeed, the triple focus of the guide—on personal and institutional dimensions of balance as well as value questions—will differentiate the SWP guide from other literature in this area that tends to address only either personal or institutional issues.

If you are willing and able to join us for work in this project, please visit our guide to facilitating a focus group on the website. If you are unable to do so, we hope that you will still look at the discussions on our website. If you have some ideas you hope we will consider, please feel free to share them with any member of SWP. (Names of committee members are also on our website.)

 Best,

Jacqueline Hidalgo

On behalf of the AAR Status of Women in the Profession Committee

Focus Group Guide

In this guide, we have presented some recommendations for running a focus group conversation about issues of work/life balance.

Suggestions for Larger Organization of the Meeting:
Please make sure that you inform everyone you invite to the discussion that the purpose of this conversation is to generate ideas, topics, challenges, and solutions for a guide on work/life balance that AAR's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (SWP) will produce. If you are recording the conversation, taking notes, or plan to share a summary report with us (either in writing or orally), make sure that you have discussed each of these aspects with your participants. If you produce a written report, you should circulate it to all participants for approval and feedback within a reasonable amount of time.

You probably want to bring a group together in a comfortable and informal setting and set a careful timeframe for the discussion (say two hours). Additionally, you may want to invite participants from roughly the same rank. At the very least, you may want to make sure that graduate students and non-tenured faculty (part-time or full-time) are not in a focus group with senior faculty or administrators who may wield power over them.

Possible conversation questions and directions:
It may be best to start with a reminder of the purposes of the focus group and what sorts of topics you hope to cover.
Then, select an opening conversational question, such as "What advice would you give someone entering the profession?" or "What do you wish you had known?" After that, the conversation will probably move along organically, and if you are preparing a summary, you will likely have to pull out major themes and ideas.

Nevertheless, we have also generated a brief list of conversation turners in case the conversation is slow or there are particular issues of concern to you. You will probably never ask most these questions, but they might give you cues to draw from if you want to move the conversation in a certain direction. They also may provide a sense of some of the issues, challenges, and questions we are hoping to get further insights into as we develop our guide.

What personal issues have impacted work/life balance?
- How did/do you navigate raising children and achieving professional goals? How have children affected your career path? Did you see anyone have trouble with childcare that adversely impacted their career path?
- How has care for family members (partners, elders) impacted your work schedule? How have you seen other people navigate being caretakers, graduate students or professors, and whole human beings?
- Have you worked to balance a disability or a chronic health issue with your academic work? How have you observed others balancing a disability or a chronic health issue with professional demands?
- What practices for self-care have been important to you as you have negotiated academic life? Are there practices that have gone by the wayside that you have wished you could engage in?

How have institutional practices aided or hindered work/life balance?
- Has your institution (or institutions) provided mentoring and collegiality to help you navigate difficult moments in balancing work and personal matters? If so, what did it look like? Was it helpful?
- (If full-time faculty) What are you most concerned about as you approach or go through the tenure and/or promotion and/or contract-renewal process? (If part-time faculty) What are you

most concerned about as you navigate part-time positions? (If a graduate student) What are you most concerned about as you navigate coursework, exams, and/or the dissertation?

- What do you wish someone had told you?
- What policies around coursework, research/writing, teaching, scheduling, facilities, etc. does your institution (or institutions) have that have helped or hindered your pursuit of work/life balance?
- What would you say to someone entering the profession? What piece of hard-won advice would you share?

What do we even mean by work/life balance?

- What are the values and commitments that undergird questions of work/life balance?
- What is the role of work in our identities? What "should" it be?
- What are the components of "life" in work/life balance (i.e., family, community, religious community)?
- How do we envision life and the place of work within it?

Women Graduate Students Work/Life Balance Focus Group

Fourteen doctoral students met for the conversation, thirteen of them women of color, the majority from Asian backgrounds. They were a mix of married, partnered, and single.

The session was characterized by an outpouring of pain around issues of sustaining personal relationships while fulfilling one's responsibilities as a graduate student. The women experienced a lot of tension and resentment. They did not question the pressures of work but felt it was nearly impossible to meet its demands and sustain family life. They found it especially difficult to be relationships with people not in the academy who did not understand its demands. The *price* of being in the academy was high. They felt as if they kept falling further behind.

In Asian cultures, there is a strict hierarchy where women and their needs always come last. The women are swimming against this, but they also don't want to surrender their identity or demonize their heritage. While the students had exposure to feminist theory in classes, they found it very difficult to integrate feminism on a personal level. E.g., they equated being a feminist with getting divorced.

The participants experienced a lot of isolation and loneliness. Single people felt especially lonely and suffered from high expectations from extended family that they had lots of available time. Married women felt under intense pressure to have children if they didn't yet have them. A number of women wondered if they would have children. Some felt their biological clocks ticking. Some didn't want children but were being pressured to have them.

They were delighted to be able to meet and talk and were excited about the idea of forming a group to discuss these issues. What came up again and again was the need for mentoring and support. They were unaware of the mentoring available through the AAR on things like submitting journal articles or contacting publishers. But there were also a lot of internal tensions in the group—a lot of competition generally and for the attention of faculty members.

Mid-Career and Tenure-Track Women Faculty Work/Life Balance Focus Group
April 17, 2011

Attended by seven women: one senior faculty member/administrator, and six tenure-track assistant professors, two of whom are currently in the final stages of tenure review; four women with children (from elementary school age to grown), six partnered/married – mostly to men; four white, two Latina, one African-American.

In these notes, we have attempted to compile a list of significant themes that arose through an organic conversation. We have broken the themes into three sections: individual (as in themes that relate to problems and possibilities that different individuals confront), institutional (as in challenges and potential best practices that institutions meet and should consider), and values/structural (the larger theoretical frames and questions that may undergird the individual and the institutional). Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list, we hope that they will provide a place to begin thinking about foci. Many issues that appear in one section could easily be placed in another section when perceived from another angle.

One thing that emerged repeatedly is the way that many aspects of academic life are or have the potential to be either positive or negative:

In thinking about the value of academic work, there is a positive side to valuing it highly, as it can be experienced as a vocation, and a negative side: because it is experienced as an alternative to corporate lifestyles or capitulation to dominant values, we are, perhaps ironically, willing to tolerate certain kinds of pressures beyond what we would accept from industry.

In thinking about tenure and demands on tenure-track academics, the fact of significant flexibility in hours (for the most part) coexists with significant demands on time beyond what non-academics recognize. Several people raised the notion that a tenure-track position involves more than one job (teaching, advising/mentoring, faculty service, research), and though there are fewer fixed hours than in a 9-5 office job there are some very key hours (can't miss class for a sick child) and overall high pressures for productivity.

A variety of other pro/con sides to common features of institutional life and individual circumstances also arose and are signaled throughout.

Individual
Resources
- The challenge of graduate school training and pre-tenure professional life if one has a family to take care of financially (graduate stipends, housing, education for children)
- Tenure is equated with security but struggle and adjunct life is untenable for most families because of benefits. How does one navigate these choices and make them work?

Family Care
- Pros and cons of having an academic partner: flexibility versus challenge of joint job decision-making; dual pressures
- How does an academic navigate shared family responsibilities (child care or elder care) especially if one's partner is not an academic, but someone who also has a busy work and travel schedule? How does one create a schedule to accommodate family responsibilities (teaching schedules, balancing evening event expectations, etc.)?
- Handling the "two body" problem and institutional expectations?

Navigating the Institution
- What strategies exist for navigating institutional expectations that make community demands?

How does one survive schmoozing?
- How do individuals from minoritized backgrounds navigate expectations of "face-time" within departments?
- How can individuals build healthful and supportive relationships within department and institution (instead of obligatory, hierarchical ones)?
- How can individuals plan for getting out of institutions that are just not good fits?
- How do you learn when and where to say "no"?
- What strategies exist for making decisions about what most matters to you? How does one then build a coalition with others who share those goals?
- How does one navigate feelings of powerlessness especially given the knowledge that there are so many more qualified PhDs than there are positions (and thus one feels easily replaced)?
- What are the institutional pressure points for individuals who want to make changes?

Work/Life Interrelationship
- Academics are often devoted to their work in ways that do not signal a neat work/life balance
- Work and life are intertwined, especially for those who support their families with their income.
- But how does one also navigate a job that often demands you be away from home so often?
- At the same time, individuals can resist the notion of constant preoccupation; individuals often have to learn not to sacrifice themselves before the notion of tenure; individuals often have to learn where and when to draw lines.
- Recognition of academy's gendered, cultural, and racial presumptions can provide a resource of critical distance from burdensome expectations

Institutional
Resources
- How might institutions better provide resources (financial as well as critical support systems such as child care and education) from graduate school through tenure for academics with familial obligations?
- How can an institution provide more resources for varying kinds of development (example of grants for faculty to pay an editor)?
- What about having quality of life surveys that make public information about faculty satisfaction and work/life balance?

Institutional Culture
- How can institutions shape themselves as relational spaces that foster a community without making unbalanced demands or masking hierarchy?
- How can recognition of the varying tasks of academic life be built in (that job is more than teaching and researching)?
- Can institutions adopt a kind of "diversity" or "visions" training for all incoming faculty? What would it look like? How can such training be used to provide a common language and sense of guidelines but also to prevent "blame, shame, and attack"?
- How can senior faculty do a better job of modeling work/life balance?
- If it seems that so much at an institution depends on its present leadership, how can policies be put in place to keep less mindful leaders in check?
- What institutions and departments already have practices we should all learn from?
- How can institutions ensure their faculty are affirmed and given credit for the diverse works they do and gifts they share?

Reconceptualizing Tenure
- Why are there not part-time tenure clocks?
- How can institutions create teaching schedules and community expectations that recognize the time commitments of family demands?

Mandating Self-Care
- How might institutions work at providing self-care resources and support for faculty (i.e. putting self-care questions into annual evaluation, asking how the institution can help, mandating two weeks of vacation away from office and email)?
- How will institutions balance changing expectations in the profession (Dept. of Education wanting to lengthen semesters? If one thing is added, where will another be subtracted?)?

Values/Structural

Individualism
- To what extent does academic life presume an individual "Robinson Crusoe" pursuing academic wisdom and self-discovery while having no family obligations, or even more so, having a second source of income (or a source of funding in addition to graduate stipends and junior faculty salaries)?
- How can academic life reconceptualize itself humanely? What would it mean to recognize the importance of humane, interpersonal relationships among colleagues?
- In what ways do individuals from minoritized communities (women, LGBTIQ, people of color, (dis)abled) overwork themselves and try to overcompensate? How do they navigate what are often greater familial and personal demands paired with institutions that tend to devalue their labor? How do women especially internalize ideas about womanly and nurturing navigation of academic labor?
- Is academic life a "vocational" commitment? Is it something one should only take up if one cannot possibly do something else, if one feels "called"? What are the possibilities and limits of such a conceptualization of academic life?

Work/Life Balance?
- To what extent does this discussion even depend upon Western liberal conceptions of labor? In what ways are "work" and "life" not so easily disentangled?
- In what ways do academics overvalue their labor and their skewed "workaholism" in order to justify the "life of the mind" in the face of a capitalist society that values material and monetary production?
- How might academic life be reconceptualized so an academic career could be more flexible?

Culture
- How can academic culture be reimagined so that individuals do not feel they "weren't thought of" in the design of this profession?
- How can academic culture reconceptualize itself so as to value the work of minoritized scholars in and of itself and not for the sake of numerical "diversity"?
- Should this guide not place its gaze upon the institution? The question should be how can the institution learn to accommodate young women not how can young women learn to accommodate the institution?

How can this guide be written in such a way that it is taken seriously academically? How might this guide challenge institutions to transform themselves, to make discussion of work/life balance an important part of institutional visioning and not just casual conversation over wine? How can this be a targeted and academically productive guide and not just a brochure?

Tenured Women Faculty Focus Group on Work/Life Balance
January 17, 2012

Five women were present, all white, married or partnered and with children. Three were mid-career, two senior. Children ranged in age from pre-school to adult.

Concerns, problems, and questions

- Colleagues are more accepting of junior faculty involved in childcare than senior care.
- People who saw themselves as in a different place in relation to care than the mainstream of their departments felt the need to hide their involvement in care. *There was lots of talk about hiding and making the work of care invisible*
- When faculty members are clear about needing to do care work, colleagues are often annoyed.
- *Each faculty member feels the need to do her own juggling and sees lack of balance as her own problem.*
- It is not the case that people who have been or are in the same situation with regard to care work necessarily support or protect each other.
- The demand that junior faculty be present for lectures and college events does not fit with the need to meet the school bus.
- How does someone who is gendered to do care work function as an academic?
- One person commented that her husband doesn't necessarily prioritize her having a balanced life. She should either be working or involved in childcare. He's less willing to pitch in for self-care (like this meeting).
- What kind of role models are we for our kids as we negotiate with our partners around these issues?
- The assumption that faculty members who are home are "not working" is widespread and difficult to deal with.
- Part of the problem is that our feelings of identity and self-worth are closely bound up in our work. There is always the feeling that "if I publish another book or article or give another lecture, then I'll be valued." Work is a stand-in for other things.
- For more senior people, service to the profession becomes another pull alongside teaching and care work. Speaking engagements take a lot of energy at the same time that they can be rewarding. Sometimes it is financially necessary to accept them.
- The first five years of teaching, especially with children, is simply impossible.
- People sometimes left a sick kid a home propped up with the sports section, calling in and/or running home during breaks. How did we do it?
- It's easy to fall asleep in watching a show with family because we're so exhausted. Once we stop running, we come to a halt.

Strategies

Personal

- People wish they had known that colleagues were likely to have been far more sympathetic about crises than they feared or imagined.
- Babysitting can be part of research budget. No one tells you that.
- It's important to know who you can count on for help and support both inside and outside the university.
- Some people felt that moving close to the college/university was crucial in making things work. Others found it helpful to have distance from their institutions.
- A faculty member who lived near campus was able to bring her children to the office and have students babysit when she was in class.
- If one is going to have a balanced life, it can be complicated to have colleagues as close friends.

- While work can assume too much importance, it's also important not to put it in a corner.
- Read over your CV and appreciate all that you have accomplished.
- Decide how much committee work you can take on in a given year and say no when asked to do more.
- Enquire about compensation in the form of release time or money for extra work you do. What constitutes an overload besides taking on an extra course?
- It's important to be attentive to your own choices about where to put your energy and to be aware of how you are experiencing those choices in your body and your life.
- Know that "there is no such thing as an academic emergency."
- It is important to find community with whom to de-stress.
- Sharing issues around teaching is a way of creating community.
- It is important to tame technology—to put on your syllabus, e.g., when you will check your e-mail.

Institutional

- It's enormously important for a department to create a culture that acknowledges that people have lives.
- Departments need to make schedules on the basis of where people need to be when.
- Colleges/universities need to think about faculty needs in setting up broader scheduling patterns.
- Mentoring is very important, particularly mentors for junior faculty from outside the department.
- Institutions need gyms and places to take naps.
- Universities need to provide the option of stopping the tenure clock for pregnancy and childcare.

Larger Issues

- We debated whether balance is possible. Some people felt that pre-tenure, it's simply unrealistic, and it would be helpful for people to simply know, the next five years will be hell, but that's not the rest of life. Others were not willing to give up on the idea of balance. To be frazzled is not to be a productive member of the community.
- For people with children, there is only working or taking care of the kids. The rest of life disappears or is put on hold. Where does yoga fit in, e.g.? It doesn't.
- Religious community can be a potentially important counter to the work/care dualism. It can provide both an alternative network and a place of regular connection.
- Academics and nonacademics can have very different perceptions of what a balanced academic life looks like. One woman's husband thinks she always puts work first when from her point of view, she repeatedly puts family first.
- Balance is not a state of stasis that is attained and preserved. There are seasons to a life and, indeed, to a semester. Try to take a long view.
- Think about where you want to devote your major energy in a particular semester or year. A book project may be on the front burner one year but teaching another year. Pre-tenured faculty often do not have the freedom to think in this way but tenured faculty do.
- Do pressures on faculty members differ regionally? Is living in an area of the country where many people hike or ski different from being in the Northeast?
- It feels so wrong that we do work that is about meaning making but don't have time to make meaning in our own lives.
- How do we create a professional context in which the bar is different, in which people are admired and rewarded for living balanced lives? Why are there no half-time tenured positions, e.g.? How did the issue of shared jobs simply fall of the table?