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To cite this article: Joanna Sturhahn Stratton, Angela Miekle, Susan Kirshenbaum, Amanda Goodrich & Cynthia McRae (2006) Finding a Balanced Life: Factors That Contribute to Life Satisfaction in Graduate Students, Journal of College and Character, 7:8, , DOI: 10.2202/1940-1639.1217

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1217

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Published online: 01 Oct 2006.

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Finding a Balanced Life: Factors That Contribute to Life Satisfaction in Graduate Students

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Abstract

Graduate students are required to negotiate a number of roles such as spouse, parent, employee and student. This study was undertaken to learn more about the quality of life among graduate students and what types of support might be most helpful in assisting students address their desire for meaning and purpose. Results of this study indicated that social support, balance of life and work roles, optimism, and spirituality all contributed to student satisfaction.

Graduate students often have many roles and possess a multiplicity of responsibilities in addition to their academic commitments. There is often a struggle to meet the obligations of their particular programs as they fulfill co-existing roles and try to engage in other satisfying aspects of life. In essence, graduate students struggle to “balance” their lives. Austin (2002) summarized this position well when she stated that “Challenges with maintaining personal interests and personal relationships are especially critical aspects of balance for many graduate students.” Although there is a large body of literature regarding many aspects of undergraduate life and development (Astin, 2003; Belcheir, 2003; Kohen, Nestel, & Karmas, 1978; Monaghan, 1993; Oberlander, 1989; Schoem, 2002), there is little literature related to graduate student life. It was the purpose of this study to examine some of the experiences of graduate students in order to learn more about the factors that both contribute to, and detract from their life satisfaction, and to discuss ways in which student affairs professionals can react to these unique concerns. Life satisfaction in this study is defined as an individual’s own perception of personal well-being which is influenced by life events (Fujita & Diener, 2005).

Austin’s longitudinal research with 79 graduate students outlined a number of concerns related to an overall sense of “balance” in students’ lives (2002). Results indicated that loss of

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balance led to health problems, negative impacts on personal relationships, and foundational questions about their motives for undertaking this rigorous course in life. Although many students recognize the importance of balance, purpose and life satisfaction, this aspect of graduate school may not be integrated into the graduate program’s design or curriculum. Since one of the goals of the academy is to aid students in their personal growth and attainment of individualized goals, it is important for university leaders, student affairs generalists, administrators, faculty members, and support staff to recognize that graduate students are as concerned about the overall quality of their lives as they are about their grade point average.

The importance of life satisfaction and a student’s desire to perceive their education as a meaningful endeavor typically receives little recognition or discussion in graduate school coursework or advising sessions. However, it could be argued that it is relevant to almost all graduate students and affects student performance, and perhaps retention and completion of degrees. It is for this reason that we have chosen to investigate this issue.

**Method**

A heuristic approach was utilized in the development of this study. “Heuristics is a passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving. When utilized as a framework for research, it offers a disciplined pursuit of essential meanings connected with everyday human experience” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). The study was, in fact, based on the researchers’ own experiences as graduate students and reflects their attempt to make meaning of their experiences by interviewing a broader sample of students.

It is essential to note that there are several inherent complexities when using an interview format within the heuristic approach. For instance, conducting individual interviews is time intensive. A focus group may expedite the interviewer’s data gathering process. This type of format may have allowed the students to clarify their thoughts with other students or discuss their ideas for changes or improvement within the academic program with faculty or staff. However, upon considering the complications and time intensive nature of the interview methodology, the researchers decided that it would be better to obtain the student interviews separately in order to capture the most unfiltered and thus meaningful information. The researchers also wanted to guard against the students’ desire to impress faculty or even other students, but rather offer their honest answers to sensitive questions.

All graduate students within the College of Education at the university were eligible to participate in the study. After approval was received from the Institutional Review Board, flyers describing the study were distributed to all students. Interviewees were assured that their participation and responses would be kept confidential. Participation was voluntary and a financial incentive was offered. Identification numbers of students who participated in the study were entered into a raffle for a cash prize. The four student investigators who developed the study were trained to administer the interviews in a standardized manner.

**Participants**

The participants in this study included 16 graduate students who were currently enrolled in the College of Education. The sample was comprised of five men and 11 women and involved 11 students who were considered “traditional,” or graduate students in their twenties, and five “nontraditional” graduate students in their thirties, forties, and fifties. There were eight Master’s degree students and eight doctoral students. Five students reported that they did not hold a job while the other 11 indicated that they were currently employed. When asked to indicate their current level of life satisfaction, students reported an average of 4.75 on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 6 (very high).
Measures

Each interviewee completed a brief demographic questionnaire and participated in a qualitative interview. The interview consisted of several open-ended questions. The questions included:

1. What do you do to help keep your life balanced?
2. Describe three aspects of your life that bring you satisfaction.
3. Is there something that is keeping you from feeling more satisfied with your life?

Analysis

Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Each of the four interviewers evaluated their own transcripts for common themes, and the group discussed and synthesized the findings. The researchers closely examined all the data in order to identify the essential elements of life satisfaction in this sample. Admittedly, there is possible bias in the nature of the analysis. The interviewers, who were students themselves, may unknowingly have inserted their own thoughts and personal opinions when developing the themes. In order to address this bias, each interview was transcribed and the non-interviewing researchers on the team examined the text and asserted their own thoughts about the themes from the interview. Thus, a process of informal interrater reliability was used to arrive at themes based on the interviews.

Results

Results are presented in terms of responses to each of the questions. Consistent themes that emerged from the responses are then highlighted.

What do you do to help keep your life balanced?

The most common responses to this question are presented in Table 1. The graduate students in our study spoke about the number of “hats” they were required to wear. While graduate students must attend to the more obvious requirements of graduate school, such as writing papers and taking exams, they often must perform the role of mother, spouse, or full-time employee. One graduate student stated that balance is difficult to maintain during graduate school:

• “Balance? Graduate school is throwing life out of balance. I try to make lots of lists. I am trying to stick to the lists and be flexible with things that have to change.”

Another student emphasized the importance of social support:

• “In order to balance my life, I have to make time for my friends. I need my friends.”

A third graduate student addressed the question about how she balanced her role as a student with the other important and self-defining aspects of her life by stating:

• “I feel that I am a very balanced person. Sometimes I feel guilty if I am social, but I remind myself that doing non-academic activities makes me happy. I also exercise; it takes me out of the chaos.”

Finally, another graduate student was able to identify why she did not feel like her life was currently in balance:
“I’ve always been really spiritual, but I haven’t been going to church, and I feel like that would be helpful in my life now to pray or go to church.”

Some of the graduate students stated that they felt like they could benefit from the perspective and clarity that spirituality provides. However, as the students themselves noted, sometimes it is difficult to find time for the activities which provide so much pleasure and satisfaction.

The graduate students in our study reported knowing that while spare time is scarce, they are aware that it is important to pursue other endeavors which provide their life meaning. Every graduate student we interviewed made a thoughtful comment related to how they attempt to keep leisure, exercise, spirituality or non-academic intellectual pursuits as part of their lives. Most participants stated that when they felt their pursuits were “balanced,” they were fulfilled and satisfied with their lives and with graduate school.

*Describe three aspects of your life that bring you satisfaction.*

The most common responses to this question are presented in Table 2. Based on these responses, the most frequent contributors to feelings of satisfaction were social support, optimism related to education and goal setting, and perceived balance. Social support was reported to be an invaluable resource. One student asserted that in order to feel satisfied, she needed family support:

- “Support is everything. A good family life is the basis of everything. The rest falls into place.”

Additionally, many graduate students understand that satisfaction is a matter of interpreting life events in a positive way and “counting blessings.” Most of our sample stated that they remained optimistic by appreciating their abilities, rather than focusing on their inadequacies. One particular student stated that her optimism was strongly rooted in her emphasis on enjoying the present while being aware of future opportunities. This type of optimism and sense of perspective has helped her feel joy regarding her decision to add the role of student to her pre-existing roles:

- “I see them (goals) as potential for my own growth. In life, there are opportunities and I am always conscious of opportunity.”

Another student reported that balancing fun and academics is invaluable:

- “My professors understand that spending time with my family is important. I could not get through graduate school if I had to give up quality time with my children.”

*Is there something that is keeping you from feeling more satisfied with your life?*

The most common responses to this question are presented in Table 3. Graduate students are often engaged in activities that require them to draw independently upon their own aptitude, knowledge and discipline. For this reason, the journey through graduate school may feel isolating and lonely. In fact, over 50% of the graduate students in our study stated that they would feel more fulfilled if they were more connected with individuals within their particular cohort. One student clearly stated that her emotional distance from other graduate students was keeping her from feeling satisfied:
• “Sometimes I think that other graduate students are too busy for a new relationship. But, I think that I would benefit from having a friend who knew what I was going through. School is a big part of my life and I don’t have anyone to share this with.”

A “need for achievement” was also mentioned as a hindrance to life satisfaction. In fact, one particular graduate student stated that despite reaching a goal, she focuses on her shortcomings, and remains dissatisfied with herself:

• “I never let myself feel satisfied when I complete a goal. I feel that I can always do more next time. I can always do better.”

It appears that this student was so focused on future goals that she failed to enjoy her present successes. Graduate students in this study revealed that in order to feel fulfilled in their current academic endeavors, it was important that they believed that their new role had meaning and purpose. One student stated that:

• “When I’m challenged, I feel more satisfied with my life. I love that in my current job [a practicum related to school], I feel I am not just a number- what I do matters!”

**Discussion**

Several common themes were present across responses to the questions. The participants consistently indicated that social support, optimism, balance in life, and spirituality were important contributors to life satisfaction. More specifically, students emphasized the need to connect with other graduate students, receive support from faculty, focus on the positive aspects of their abilities and graduate school, and balance academics with free time. Graduate students mentioned that they were more fulfilled in graduate school when they felt like their educational endeavors were meaningful and furthered their ability to live with intention and purpose.

**Social Support**

All of the students revealed that the addition of the student role has been stressful and that they need the support of family and friends to achieve their goals. Trust in the availability of support has been shown to be a protective factor during stressful life events (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996), such as graduate school. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) reported that satisfying family lives and having intimate friends are related to students feeling satisfied with their lives and increases their likelihood of graduating.

Students also identified that social support from other students and faculty is equally important. For instance, students in this study claimed that they flourish when they engage in activities with other students that emphasize their commonalities. Several authors (Calder & Melanson, 1994; Polinsky, 2003; Tinto, 1987) have indicated that lack of social-integration with other students is one of the main reasons that students cite for dropping out of their particular graduate program. Similarly, research by Goenner and Snaith (2004) found that higher perceived level of faculty support was related to higher retention and graduation rates of graduate students. It is clear that social support and a feeling of “connectedness,” or academic-social integration contribute to life satisfaction and bolster student retention and graduation (Polinsky, 2003). Student affairs personnel have a responsibility to establish a program that is able to respond to this desire for connection. Even graduate students with their many obligations want to put time and energy into this important part of their identities.
Optimism

It is reasonable to assume that students would not enroll in graduate school if they were not optimistic about their education, goals, and the future (see Table 2). However, nine of 16 students reported that they struggled to focus on either their strengths or the benefits of being a student. Research has shown that graduate students are more likely to graduate when they are satisfied with their efforts and can focus on their strengths rather than their shortcomings (Barefoot, 2000; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Polinsky, 2003). An academic program that encourages individual growth and personal meaning-making rather than student competition, is more likely to foster this focus. Optimism is an important contributor to the positive appraisal of graduate school and life satisfaction.

Balance

The feeling of keeping life “balanced” resonated with every graduate student we interviewed. In this study, balance is defined as participating in and obtaining satisfaction from professional, family, and personal roles and responsibilities (Burke, 2004). The roles, or the set of expectations applied to a particular position, can create role-overload, or the perceived lack of ability to meet demands (Dobreva-Martinova, Villeneuve, Strickland, & Matheson, 2002). According to Goode’s (1960) “scarcity” perspective on role strain, conflicts resulting from the addition of student role to other life roles may have a negative impact on life satisfaction (Anderson & Miezitis, 1999). In fact, it has been shown that many graduate students who are forced to sacrifice too much for their education fail to graduate (Goenner & Snaith, 2004).

Graduate students not only desire balance but are often engaged in an effort to find meaning and purpose in their educational endeavors as well as their lives in general. Striving for meaning and purpose has long been understood as one of life’s major goals. Ryff (1989) described this well by stating that “The definition of maturity [as well as mental health] emphasizes a clear comprehension of life’s purpose, a sense of directedness, and intentionality. Thus, one who functions positively has goals, intentions, and a sense of direction, all of which contribute to the feeling that life is meaningful.”

Faculty, administrators and student affairs professionals should be aware of the issues that are most relevant for “nontraditional” students whose family, work or other responsibilities may take precedence at times over school (Anderson & Miezitis, 1999). Older learners may have already developed an understanding of what is valuable to them personally, and consistently evaluate how their graduate experience coincides with these ideals. While this study investigated one particular graduate program, the participants were diverse in age, gender, discipline, and occupational status. For this reason, we suggest that the issues that emerged in this study may be similar to issues affecting graduate students in comparable programs.

Spirituality

The American, individualistic atmosphere traditionally places value upon a person’s ability to attain goals. Students may perceive education as a way to honor this value. Sedikides, Gaertner & Toguchi (2003) discuss how the Western individualistic culture values an individual’s efforts to express inner attributes through personal goal attainment. Though graduate students may share high aspirations for both educational and occupational success, they also desire and place value upon an active spiritual life. Indeed, graduate students endorse actively struggling with existential questions such as, searching for deeper meaning in their lives, nurturing their inner selves by maintaining balance in their lives and “seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community” (Astin, 2004). However, seldom do graduate programs directly address these types of desires for spiritual growth.
With the exception of adult religious education, research on spirituality in higher education is sparse. Most recently, the role of spirituality in teaching and learning in higher education has focused on the intricate relationship that exists between how adults make meaning of their educational journey and their spiritual quest in adulthood (English & Gillen, 2000; Glazer, 1999; Hunt et al., 2001; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000). Indeed, attending to spiritual development may be a contributing element that enhances life satisfaction during adult education. Some studies have demonstrated that graduate students who endorse having a religious orientation or spiritual beliefs are better able to buffer against stressful life events and report higher well-being (Calicchia & Graham, 2006). Despite this, only five percent of clinical psychology graduate students report that they received training or classes that addressed religious issues (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts, & Wajda-Johnston 2002).

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA began a major, multi-year research project to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years (Astin, 2004). Findings from a survey of 112,232 entering first-year students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities across the country indicated that college students endorsed a high degree of interest in spiritual interest and involvement. In addition, the relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being suggested that students who acknowledged their spirituality reported being able to “find meaning in times of hardship” and “feel more at peace and centered” during their educational experience. Perhaps future research could focus on this topic among graduate students. It is for this reason that graduate programs should acknowledge the spiritual needs of the students who desire this enhancement.

**Options for Change**

Students have indicated the need and desire to make meaning out of their educational endeavor and that they would appreciate the support from within the program. The collegial atmosphere of a graduate program can be significantly impacted by every level of a university or college including university leaders, student affairs generalists, administrators, faculty members, and support staff. Clearly, there are institutional factors that can help students feel supported, connected, and optimistic about their future (Goenner & Snaith, 2004). For example, peer support groups where students can share concerns and ask questions about how graduate school accommodates their broader goals and desires could be encouraged. These groups also offer the advantage of a relaxed atmosphere where students can gather together and support one another’s academic journey (Yates, 2001). Responses from the students in this study suggested that it would be helpful if faculty recognized the importance of other dimensions of students’ lives beyond academics. Perhaps student advising sessions could incorporate dialogue about how to set long-term goals, procure jobs, and balance family and work demands. Some schools have adopted new academic advisement models that address the specific developmental issues of graduate students (Selke & Wong, 1993). Middle Tennessee State University has established an Adult Service Center that has extended bookstore and administrative hours and offers seminars in career counseling and stress management.

The graduate student’s path is arduous at times, but given the right resources, graduate school can be rewarding and satisfying. It is important to encourage dialogue within the graduate school community about how students can make the most of their academic journey while remaining connected to the other important aspects of their lives.

**References**


### Table 1

Responses to “How to keep your life balanced?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends (including within program)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organization</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation activities/hobbies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping/eating</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveling/escaping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is not in balance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Responses to “Three Aspects that Bring Satisfaction”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends (including in program)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical wellness</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure activities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service to others (supporting, listening, teaching)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present and future career</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3

Responses to “What is Keeping You from Satisfaction?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative outlook on life</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of financial aid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacking a significant other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need more free time</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of friendships</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spread too thin/need more balance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need more spirituality</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>