TJU Graduate Students’ Perspectives on Work-Life Balance: A Photo-Elicitation Study

Pamela Myers, MPH(c)

Collaborators: Madalene Zale, MPH, Violette Gerzen, MPH(c)

Mentors: Amy Henderson Riley, DrPH and Rosemary Frasso, PhD

BACKGROUND

- Graduate school applications rose 7% each year between 2006 - 2016.
- As enrollment increases, the demand for mental health (MH) services in this setting is increasing.
- Graduate school deans report that current students struggle to maintain mental wellness more now than students five years ago.
- Work-life balance (WLB) has been linked to mental wellness.
- Graduate students often juggle part-time or full-time employment, academic work, research, internships, family, friendships, and other life commitments.

Purpose: To explore WLB in graduate students.

Research Question: How do full-time graduate students at TJU perceive and define their own work-life balance?

METHODS

The Study
- Nested in the qualitative research course (summer 2018)
- Snowball sampling
- TJU students from the Center City campus
- Employed Photo Elicitation (PE)

Procedures
- Step 1: Student-researchers met with participants to explained the PE process and obtain consent
- Step 2: Interview using photos to elicit responses

What is PE?
- PE uses participant-generated images to guide in-depth interviews
- Generally a two-step process

Data Analysis
- Interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Directed Content Analysis facilitated by NVivo 12
- Double-coded
- Research team met to resolve discrepancies and refine code

Themes
Resultant codes were organized into 3 thematic categories

Ethical Considerations
- Jefferson IRB approval
- Photos shared with participants’ permission

RESULTS

12 participants, including 10 MPH students and 2 medical students from TJU, completed a PE interview. Below we highlight the 3 themes that resulted from our analysis and share participant-generated photos and related quotations to provide insight into student perceptions of WLB.

Routine

“One of the great things that I love about every day is being able to have breakfast with the family. And not a lot of people can say that...this is an important part of our lives, having breakfast together...so we get up at like six, thirty-six, thirty-six, have breakfast and then we’re kind of out the door. Sometimes I won’t be back in time for dinner, or we have things going on at night, so it’s difficult to have it as a family...but just being able to sit down at the same table, everyone there to start your day.”

“I like my sleep, so I like to plan around it, because if I wake up super groggy, I just don’t feel like a real person, so I try and balance it, that’s one thing that I need to have as routine...it doesn’t matter to me how late I sleep as long as I get the 7 to 8 hours that I need.”

Self-Care

“This picture is coming back from vacation. It was the first break that I had after finishing classes. I had a few days where I was just chilling and not really doing anything, but then when I went to Miami, I really felt like I took a step back from everything that happened this year and the stress of school. I was just hanging out with friends from undergrad, which was refreshing and just a nice breath of fresh air.”

“This was taken on an afternoon with a friend. So we saw what we thought was a very large pile of poop. We were studying in the library, but took a break to go to the store. So, on the walk back, we actually did see this, and I took a picture of it and we were laughing...it was an awesome study break...my work-life balance has certainly been out of whack, and that certainly prompted me to come to the library that day. I have been having a hard time focusing on things...I think my attention span is sort of waning, not because of the material, but because I think I’m someone that needs the occasional break, and we haven’t really had a good one. But this was a good way to break up an otherwise monotonous day.”

“I try to exercise when I can, but also now that the weather is nice, it’s also just is a way to get any outdoor time, which can be hard to come by. I think that really helps me sort of stay balanced, and really helps my mood definitely, just to like get a little exercise and go outside.”

Managing School

“This picture is coming back from vacation. It was the first break that I had after finishing classes. I had a few days where I was just chilling and not really doing anything, but then when I went to Miami, I really felt like I took a step back from everything that happened this year and the stress of school. I was just hanging out with friends from undergrad, which was refreshing and just a nice breath of fresh air.”

“I try to exercise when I can, but also now that the weather is nice, it’s also just is a way to get any outdoor time, which can be hard to come by. I think that really helps me sort of stay balanced, and really helps my mood definitely, just to like get a little exercise and go outside.”

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Strengths: Proper use of PE to facilitate interviews. Limitations: the small sample size did not allow us to reach saturation, and participants represented only two disciplines. Discussion: Program directors, faculty, administrators and students interested in understanding WLB will find these results of interest. Results could inform interventions to improve the graduate school experience - 1) Participants struggled with moving targets in relation to syllabi and assignments. There is a need for program faculty to maintain consistency with expectations, 2) Participants felt they did not always know who to rely on for mentoring in graduate school. Thus, there is a need for school administrators to assign students an advisor upon admission so students know who to turn to for assistance with school stressors, finding research opportunities, and maintaining time management. Lastly, there is a need for students themselves to discuss struggles with WLB and MH more openly in an effort to reduce stigma.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by the MPH program at JCPH. We are grateful to the Summer 2018 PBH 512 course instructors, Amy Henderson Riley, DrPH, and Rosemary Frasso, PhD, as well as the rest of the Summer 2018 PBH 512 student-researchers and all study participants.