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Time Management

March 16, 2009

By [David Domke](#)

Like many of you, I find it challenging to be a good teacher, researcher and colleague while also living up to expectations in my personal life (in my case, as a spouse, father, friend, and chocolate-chip cookie-eater). When I sense my life getting out of balance, I remember one of the suggestions made by Stephen Covey in his international best seller, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Covey suggests that we evaluate our daily responsibilities according to their importance and urgency. I'd like to apply these two criteria to the academic world.

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Things high in importance, high in urgency.

These are the opportunities and responsibilities that consume most of our time and energy, because we care about what's going on and we encounter quick deadlines. For graduate students, these tend to be work done as an instructor and as a student. We all place high value on being good teachers and students, and there is a time-frame within which we need to prepare for teaching and attending classes. Class starts at a certain time on certain days, right?

Because teaching and attending classes are so important and so urgent, these responsibilities consume us on a daily basis. The challenge, then, is to make sure that teaching and attending class do not dominate all of our time. To be clear, I love the creativity and dynamism of teaching. But I cannot and will not allow it to crowd out my research activities, because then I get grumpy and out of professional balance.

Things high in importance, low in urgency.

For faculty and graduate students, things that are highly important but less urgent tend to include our original research and our personal relationships. Both are obviously important, and we know that. But the reality is that both of these tend not to feel as urgent as our responsibilities for a class.

For example, figuring out how to research the communication dynamics that propelled a nation to go to war is undeniably important, yet it just doesn't carry the same sense of immediacy as prepping for a class that occurs tomorrow, and then again two days later, for the next eight weeks.

Similarly, going out to dinner with a close friend can always be put off until another day, right? And that's exactly what happens with things that are important but not (as) urgent -- we tend to push them to the side. As a result, many of us get the teaching and student work done first and only then turn to a focus on original research or personal time that nurtures us. If such time does not materialize, and it often doesn't, then so be it.

And that's the rub of the matter. We must make certain that we devote time to things that are highly important, but low in urgency. If we do not, the nature of the academy is that highly important, highly urgent tasks will crowd everything else out. When that occurs, burnout ensues.

Here are a few steps that we can take to make sure we give adequate priority to things high in importance and low in urgency:

Schedule them. If you don't schedule them, they don't happen. As a faculty member, I schedule my research time and personal activities, to make sure they happen. Otherwise they won't.

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Do different things on different days of the week. I have found that I am best when focusing on one primary type of work task a day. That is, if I teach on Tuesday then I probably won't be much good as a researcher that day. For me, Mondays and Fridays tend to be days that I spend doing primarily research and committee work.

Believe that you will actually be a better teacher and student when you do take time to immerse yourself in what is highly important, but not (as) urgent. I'm entirely convinced that when I prioritize occasional pockets of personal time I enrich my teaching and research because my mind and energy are renewed.

If we make sure that we spend quality time focused on important matters that seem less urgent, we all benefit.

David Domke is professor of communication at the University of Washington.

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