

## Striving to Balance the Faculty Load

Thomas Salem  
Elizabethtown College

### Abstract

New colleagues in engineering education are faced with an assortment of time demands and constraints. Typically, these demands may be grouped into four broad categories: professional growth, service activities, pedagogical development, and personal life. Obtaining a balance in these areas is critical for personal health and well being. This paper will explore three primary activities that have significantly impacted my efforts to balance the faculty load.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to work in a variety of industrial and academic settings. These experiences have been spread across the spectrum of large Fortune 500 corporations to smaller private companies and large state universities to small private colleges. Along the way, I've observed many successful people – employees getting promoted and faculty gaining tenure and have been able to discern some common personality traits, characteristics, and work habits that have contributed to their success.

From this basis, I've focused on three primary activities to achieve a successful balance in my load. The first step is to know yourself – your goals, requirements to achieve your goals, and your personality (or more broadly, how you work). The next step is to organize yourself – develop a detailed action plan, wisely choose how and when to invest your time, and work with your strengths while correcting areas of weakness. The final step is to manage yourself – don't rely upon a boss or a colleague to lead you to success, develop mentoring relationships, and keep these activities alive and ongoing.

### Personal well being

Life is a delicate balancing act among a wide variety of competing demands for your time and personal resources. A well-balanced life will promote inner peace and health, while a life lived on the ragged edge can be quite damaging.<sup>1</sup> Successful people regardless of their professions are continually challenged to define and strive toward this healthy balance.<sup>2</sup> One thing is certain, a formula that seems to work well for one person is not guaranteed to work for another. Thus, the arduous search for personal well being is solely an individual journey.

### Defining the faculty load

The faculty load is traditionally divided into three principle categories along the lines of teaching, research, and service. These components may be described in differing terms such as pedagogical development or professional development, but the fundamental essence of the work

is the same. For each category, academic institutions implement various measurement techniques or strategies to evaluate faculty performance. Ultimately, for the tenure-track candidate, long-term institutional decisions are based upon a thorough review of the candidate's level of achievement in these areas.

One key to success in this process is to understand and contrast your personal goals and objectives versus the institutional decision-making framework. Often times, the explicit priorities of the requirements are not formally expressed but are discerned through keen observation and inquiry. To achieve both personal and institutional success, your goals and objectives need to be fundamentally aligned with the requirements and priorities of your academic setting. Furthermore, you need to be able to structure and shape your personal priorities within the tenure-decision framework to demonstrate your accomplishments. Therefore, in addition to simply doing all of the rudimentary tasks associated with the faculty load, we are also individually tasked with managing and developing our career path.

### Know yourself

The first step in managing and developing your career path is to know yourself, starting with your personal goals and objectives as well as the requirements to reach them. There are many different reasons to choose the academic profession as a career. Some are drawn to the specialized research opportunities that exist while some are attracted to the opportunity to develop and inspire young minds. Most faculty members are involved in the profession for multiple reasons, which may be deeply intertwined and uncharted. By taking the time at the outset of your career to ascertain your interests and desires for being a faculty member, you are more likely to find a pathway for a prosperous career.

Knowing yourself involves understanding the interaction of your personality with others. Various training courses and materials exist for teaching interpersonal skills and personality management.<sup>3</sup> One primary principle for improved interaction is to recognize and know how to meet the relational needs of others. Through this recognition comes an increased capability for successful communication. Since we all have numerous interpersonal contacts each day, development of this personal skill facilitates an optimal investment of time – our most precious commodity.

Another aspect of knowing yourself is to comprehend your personality profile. Many personality diagnostic tools exist, and you can even take advantage of an online personality diagnostic.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the measurement tool, these profile tests provide basic information and understanding about your personality. Armed with this knowledge, you will be better equipped to organize and manage yourself.

### Organize yourself

Develop a plan. It sounds so simple, and yet as the saying goes “If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail.” I am a “big picture” person, so as I plan, I first develop a broad overview. My primary goal is to obtain tenure, typically a six-year process. What needs to be accomplished in these six years? How can I break this mountainous task down into realizable steps? What is the

proper sequencing of the steps? How do my personal goals align with the institutional priorities? These are the types of questions to be addressed. The answers will naturally allow for a detailed plan to emerge. Take the time to organize your plans on an annual, monthly, weekly, and even daily basis.

Recognize that there are only twenty-four hours in a day, but each hour is not equal. I am a morning person, which means that my productivity, mental prowess, creativity, and sense of energy climaxes between 8:00 and 10:30 am. After that, my day is downhill. As a result, I guard this time ferociously, scheduling activities for this timeslot with care. Keep in mind that you will respond differently to the numerous tasks that you have to accomplish. Some activities will drain energy out of you while others will tend to pump you up. Wise scheduling of your tasks within the framework of your natural body cycle will optimize your daily accomplishments. Thus, with proper care in your planning, you will be able to increase your daily productivity.

Keep your workspace organized and tidy. In an industrial setting, a former boss encouraged me to take the final ten minutes of each day to file and cleanup my office so that it was spotless. Initially, that concept did not seem to make much sense to me, but over the years, I've realized that an enormous amount of time can be wasted, simply by being disorganized. This concept includes not only your physical office space but also your 'virtual' office space (your computer) as well. A good filing system will allow you to keep current relevant information easily accessible while also facilitating a removal or disposal of outdated documents. I've discovered that a clean, organized workspace promotes a sense of freedom and clear thinking, while a cluttered, disorganized space tends to be oppressive and constraining.

In the midst of all of your other activities, understand that you are a person with unique character strengths and weaknesses. Take the time to organize yourself, thereby utilizing your strengths to the fullest while concurrently challenging yourself to overcome your weaknesses. If organizational skills are not high on your list of strengths, then challenge yourself to achieve realistic goals. Take time to access the necessary resources to help you develop personal organizational and time management skills.<sup>5</sup> There is a strong need for personal discipline in all of this, but having achieved a graduate degree demonstrates a significant level of personal discipline; you can do it.

### Manage yourself

This is the implementation step. All of the personal knowledge, planning, and organization is of little use if it is not properly implemented. This means that these activities are dynamic ongoing entities to be developed and improved on at regular intervals. For example, a daily office cleaning is something I've found to be very helpful. Once a week, I review my upcoming weekly/daily plans and activities. Once a semester, I take a day to reorganize my office, computer, and all of my files, being careful to purge all outdated items. This usually fills the trashcan several times! Once a year, I review my overall plans to readjust and restructure my goals and objectives.

None of these activities are requirements imposed upon me by any institution, dean, or

department chair. In fact, over the years I've encountered many people who choose to maintain a cluttered disorganized workspace. Typically, these people are operating in a 'crisis' mode chaotically trying to cope with the most current pressing demand. I'll bet you know a few of these people as well. Notice that this is a choice on their part, and you have a choice as well, but it will not be something imposed upon you.

Be an accurate observer of others; learn something from everyone. Solicit deeper relationships from those who earn your respect and seek guidance and assistance from them. Don't be bashful or timid about asking for help from others. Often times, I've discovered that people are eager to share from their experiences to help a colleague who is genuinely interested. Using your interpersonal relational skills, learn how to hear the deeper meaning behind the words of advice being offered. Ask probing questions to clarify your grasp of the information being conveyed.

Finally, learn how to commit a specific amount of time to your vocation. Work within that time commitment to prioritize tasks and activities. Allocate enough time to allow yourself to have a personal life outside of your job. Remember that you are going to either live to work or work to live. The latter is much more enjoyable!

## Conclusion

Balancing the faculty load is a daunting task that depends upon interpersonal, organizational, and managerial skills. These aptitudes need to be recognized, understood, and groomed for the task at hand. Careful and disciplined development in these areas will improve your productivity and overall sense of personal health and well-being.

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## Thomas Salem

Thomas Salem is an Assistant Professor of Engineering and Physics at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown PA. He earned the BSE degree from Grove City College, a MSEE and Ph.D. from The University of Alabama, and is a registered Professional Engineer in the state of Pennsylvania. In addition to his current position, he has taught in the Penn State system and has over six years of industrial employment in a variety of corporate settings.