

# *The Loneliest Faculty Orientation Table*

No one, it seemed, wanted to talk publicly about work-life balance

By SCOTT WARNOCK

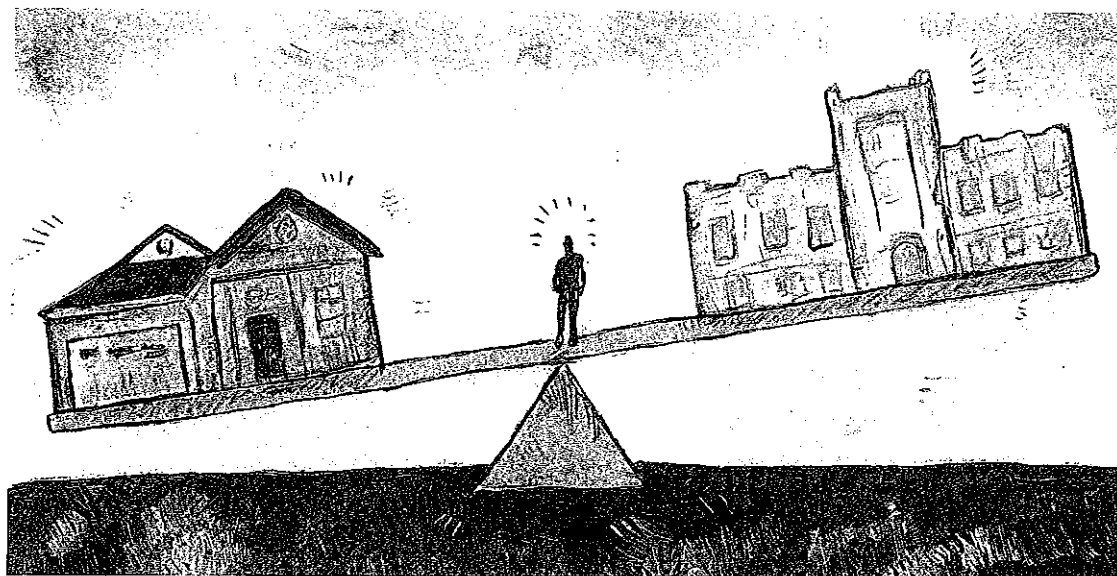
**E**ach year, I volunteer to take part in the orientation for new faculty members on my campus. It provides new hires with lots of information and quite a bit to think about.

One of the events is usually a session of roundtable discussions. Faculty rookies select from a range of topics and sit with a campus veteran or two to discuss that particular issue. As one such veteran, I've led orientation roundtables on topics like online learning, in-class assessments, and interdisciplinary partnerships. But last fall, instead, I decided to try my hand at something different: "work-life balance."

Now let me state up front: It would be a joke to

call me an expert on the applied practice — the praxis, if you will — of work-life balance. I can definitely, however, talk with some wisdom about the challenges of trying to achieve such a balance. Because I have tried.

In climbing toward a tenured faculty position at Drexel University and an administrative role as director of its writing program, I've also managed to be a youth coach and school-board member (actually, two school boards!), and I've made the effort to do lots of stuff with my three kids. One of them comes to campus with me each term, and I even have brought them with me several times to conferences. Work creeps into many hours of my private life, but I've also tried to



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maintain outside interests and friendships to fill my non-Drexel hours. So I've achieved balance of a sort.

I am probably one of the lucky ones, though. I had three great mentors who were role models of healthy behavior. First, my doctoral committee chair, Eli Goldblatt at Temple University, treated me like a real person during my dissertation years, and not as a machine being programmed to produce a 250-page, kind-of book. Then, during the first two years of my career at what was then Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College, I had the good fortune to work with Candace Spigelman, who busted my chops about getting work done while making sure that it wasn't all I was doing with my life. Finally I ended up at Drexel with the generous Abioseh Porter as my department head. He never fails to ask about my wife and three children and has emphasized during our many conversations how important it is to clear your head and get away from it all.

So I figured it was time to pay it forward, and lead a conversation about the work-life challenges that new faculty members may face, especially those just starting their academic careers.

During the roundtable event in a large room, colorful placards sat on each table, identifying the topic. Mine said: "The Delicate Balance Between Your Work and Home Lives." After a brief introduction, the attendees split up; scores of them shopped around, looking thoughtfully at the placards. Then everyone settled in for their 45-minute focused dialogue.

But there would be no conversation that day about the delicate work-life balance. No one sat at my table.

I waited, feeling like a sad sack at the eighth-grade dance. I looked alternatively enthusiastic and crestfallen, trying different strategies to market my topic. But none of my efforts inspired anyone to walk over to my table to talk about work-life balance.

Eventually, I shrugged it off and shuffled over to a nearby table to join a friend of mine in a good conversation with 10 new colleagues about online learning.

At the conclusion of the session, before I headed back to my office, I grabbed my little goldenrod placard. I put it on my desk.

As I cranked open my email, I realized I shouldn't feel all spurned and unpopular. Nor

should I feel surprised. After all, who were we fooling? Why would we think that new hires — during their first official event at Drexel — were going to put themselves out there as needing information about something as mundane, as soft, as work-life balance.

They were at that session for 45 minutes of focused, purpose-driven advice about the things that matter: teaching, publishing, learning which committees to join (and to avoid), how to get research grants, how to prepare tenure portfolios. They needed to learn how to navigate Drexel's benefits offerings, how to think about grading, and how to manage groups in the classroom. After all, the clock — a tenure clock for many of them — was ticking.

Unlike many professions, academic life is indeed a life. It's a calling, an essential part of you. You'll live it for much of your waking (and, sometimes, sleeping) hours. That's the good and bad of it. It's not drudgery and meaninglessness. But it can eat you up. And academics are often not the kind of people who would admit that.

So talking about work-life balance? We don't have time for that.

In fact, I wondered if some of the new faculty might have thought it was a trap. Perhaps my table was part of some surreptitious "test" of new hires? Was someone watching to see who made their way over to the "delicate balance" ta-

ble? Would a permanent mark go in their files — something like "not serious enough about the profession"?

Paranoia aside, that no one wanted to take the time to talk about work-life balance may ironically indicate the topic's importance, but the vote was decisively cast.

That goldenrod placard on my desk occasionally catches my eye, and I think about our attempts at having a full life. In the end, will my colleagues and I reflect back and realize that we didn't do enough to balance our jobs and the rest of our lives? Will someone from that day think, "Not only did the profession eat me up, but I started allowing that on my first day on the job?"

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