

Balancing Your Life (Boat) in the Tenure Stream

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Abstract

This paper presents a narrative describing my experiences in choosing to leave a career in consulting engineering to accept a tenure stream faculty position in Civil Engineering Technology, my adjustment to the demands of this position on my personal life, and my attempts to balance my professional and personal activities. The decision to accept this position was a realization of one of my career goals. The decision involved not only me, however, but my wife as well. Her support in accepting this position and moving to Johnstown, along with our striving to prioritize and organize our time have been significant in my attempt to achieve a balance between my professional and personal life.

Also discussed is the use of a first-person narrative format and my reasons for using that format in this paper, rather than the conventional expository form of writing, so common in professional journals and conference proceedings.

I. Introduction

This narrative relates my experiences and observations associated with my accepting an engineering technology faculty position and my attempts to balance my personal and professional life during my first semester. In writing this paper, I chose to present my experiences and observations in a first-person narrative format, rather than from the point-of-view of a detached observer. Writing in a first-person narrative format is the preferred way to relate to others about one's personal experiences¹. Through effective narration, a writer may give meaning to personal experiences, which may be of benefit to others.

II. Meaning in Narration and the First-Person Point-of-View

Narration involves the presentation of a sequence of events explaining how or why something happened². By using narration, an author can take a series of actions and events and create a coherent story in which these actions and events gain meaning through their contribution to the final outcome³.

In narrative writing, two key elements are necessary: careful and accurate sequencing of events and a consistent point-of-view². The story or experiences must be broken down into parts and presented in a meaningful order⁴. To establish this order, the writer must first analyze and organize the events and actions in their mind³, thereby providing the organization for the narrative.

A consistent point-of-view is also required. I chose to use first-person narration to present my experiences since I am intimately involved with the action and events. Most stories are written for an audience with specific interests and needs³. My audience is other new college faculty members who are also trying to balance their personal and professional lives. Relating my experiences allows any lessons I learned to be available to this audience². In addition, any common experiences shared by other faculty members may be realized and more greatly appreciated. Using the first-person point-of-view in relating my experiences allows me to include personal reflections and provides a deeper meaning to the actions and events presented in the paper.

Narration requires that a series of related events be organized in some sort of sequence and that the significance or meaning of these events be revealed to the reader. In order for the narrative to be effective, the writer must present the events and actions, as they want the readers to see them. If the characters and action are real, the readers will obtain meaning from the story⁴.

Meaning in narrative writing takes one of three forms: allegorical, realistic, or symbolic⁴. In my case, the meaning expressed in relating my experiences to others is of the realistic form. In realism, the meaning exists in the writer's reaction to the events and actions⁴. The narrator recreates experiences and establishes their significance. It is through the author's reactions to and reflections on these events that the significance of the experiences is developed³. These reactions and reflections may be announced or implied by the narrator. Through the reactions and reflections of the narrator, the experiences of the writer are given meaning for the reader. The meaning expressed through the narrator's experiences enables the reader to deepen and extend their own experiences³ in a more meaningful way than expository writing would allow.

By using a first-person narrative to present my experiences and observations, I hope that I will convey the significance and meaning of these experiences and provide useful information for others.

III. My Experiences as a New Engineering Educator

Being offered a tenure stream faculty position was a fulfillment of one of my career goals. In accepting this position, I not only had to consider my professional goals but also my wife's career goals and the goals we share together. The decision to accept this position had to be based on both of us finding fulfillment and satisfaction in our new professional and personal environment. To accomplish this we had to be aware of each other's needs and goals, evaluate the opportunities for both of us, make the decision together, and find a home and environment that satisfied us both. Our ability to establish a balance between our professional and personal lives as I began my faculty position was well rooted in our mutual involvement in the entire process of accepting this faculty position and moving to a new community. To maintain this satisfaction in both our professional and personal lives, we have had to carefully manage our time and prioritize our professional and personal activities.

IV. Understanding Each Other's Needs and Goals

In accepting a faculty position, it is important to consider the needs and goals of all involved parties.

At first I was not sure my wife understood my career goals. Leaving a consulting engineering position for a faculty position would result in a salary reduction, as well as longer work hours. My wife did not know me during my graduate school years and I was not sure she understood my purpose in getting an advanced degree. When completing my Doctorate, I was unable to find a faculty position. Fortunately, I found a consulting position with a firm known to value employees with advanced degrees and involved with applied research within my field. Although, I enjoyed this consulting position, I had decided earlier in my career that I really wanted more interactions with others in my work environment. I believe that a career in engineering education would provide this. As a registered nurse, my wife's work experiences provided similar personal interactions and rewards so she easily understood my needs and career goals.

V. Understand the Commitment Involved

To avoid any surprises, make sure that everyone involved is aware of the amount of work required for a faculty position. The family of any faculty member must be willing to actively plan family activities with the demands of the faculty position in mind. Family members not familiar with the amount of work associated with a faculty position versus an industrial position, may not understand the changes in free time available after this type of career change.

During the interview process, faculty and administrators typically emphasize what is expected of new faculty and the amount of work required for success, especially during the first several years while developing lecture notes and course materials. Potential faculty members must discuss these demands of the position with family members and emphasize that everyone would have to work together to prioritize their activities to help with the balance between professional and personal activities. These discussions need to be considered when deciding whether or not to accept a faculty position.

Although the decision often relates to only one individual's career goals, the decision must consider the goals of others in the family. When making the decision to accept the faculty position, the career goals of one's spouse also need to be considered. My wife and I felt that a very important part of the decision was whether or not she would be able to find a satisfying job in her nursing specialty. However, we felt confident that with her experience and background, she would be able to achieve this goal.

VI. Make the Decision a Mutual One

In order to keep the commitment to one's family your top priority, it is essential to make the decision to accept a faculty position a mutual one. If the decision is made by only one person, or against the wishes of another, resentment may develop making the change and adjustment process much more difficult.

In our situation, my wife and I shared the entire process from the interview to acceptance of the faculty position. Since Johnstown is only about 70 miles from where we were living in Pittsburgh, the interview was arranged as a day trip and my wife accompanied me. While I was interviewing with the faculty, she was exploring the area with a local realtor, and also discussed with nursing faculty possible job opportunities in the area. After the interview, we went exploring together and she showed me some of the things she had seen. We both saw things we liked as well as some things that gave us concerns. The area had plenty of affordable housing, but few modern apartment complexes. If we were to move there, we felt it would be preferable to buy a home.

We went home unsure as to how well the interview went and wondering if we would be happy living there. Several weeks after the interview, I was offered the faculty position. With a short period of time to think about the offer, my wife and I made a weekend trip to explore the area further. Our concerns about the community we would be moving to included limited work opportunities for my wife, as well as limited shopping, cultural and entertainment opportunities. Some of these were difficult to assess in a single weekend. The friendly small town atmosphere and numerous recreational opportunities appeared to favor the area. Although the weekend did not convince us either way, it had us leaning more toward accepting the position.

One effective way to evaluate any major decision such as this is for all involved to identify the pros and cons from their point of view. Discussing the concerns that each person may have about different issues helps improve understanding. We wrote down the pros and cons about the faculty position and moving to a new location. Based on this, we decided to accept the position.

Making the decision undoubtedly provides some relief. Excitement about the future may seem endless, yet anxieties may remain for everyone. Talking about these anxieties even after the commitment has been made to accept the position helps with the adjustment. We were relieved once our decision was made. And although we were both excited about moving and starting new careers, we were both anxious about many things. My wife was reluctant to discuss her anxieties because I seemed so excited about my new career. The stresses of my consulting job, concerns about the short period of time to find a home, preparing to move, and thoughts about my fall course load led me to express many of my anxieties and fears about what we were about to do. She was relieved to hear that I had some of the same concerns. Talking about our fears helped us to confront our concerns together.

The concerns we faced were similar to those any family would face in such a situation. Although we were only moving 70 miles, we were leaving behind friends, careers, familiar surroundings, and the convenience and opportunities of a larger city for a much smaller and somewhat economically distressed location. It would be a challenge living in a new community, actively finding new friends and interests and discovering what our new community had to offer. In addition, I was concerned that the demands of the tenure process at a small institution where excellence in teaching is emphasized would consume much of my time, reducing my ability to pursue personal activities with my wife.

In order for me to succeed in the faculty position and in my personal life, I needed to organize and balance my professional and personal activities. I knew that my first semester would be difficult and that I would improve my chances at success if I could get a head start on my preparations. Unfortunately I could not carry out my good intentions. Completing projects at my consulting job, dealing with realtors, mortgage lenders, home inspectors and packing for the move were all deadline-based priorities that had to be completed before the semester began. I wish now that I had left my consulting job several weeks earlier to set up my new office, organize my files and familiarize myself with the laboratory equipment. I believe these extra few weeks would have made this semester easier and helped me be more efficient.

To familiarize yourselves with a new area, it is suggested that you get a mail subscription to the local newspaper, and contact the local convention and visitors bureau or chamber of commerce for information. They can provide information about schools, libraries, and tax rates, as well as shopping, cultural, entertainment and recreational opportunities in the community. These can be helpful in deciding where to live. The Places Rated Almanac⁵ can also be consulted to assess a certain area relative to other areas one is familiar with. Although the area's overall ranking was not as high as where we were moving from, it was higher than other locations where we had friends and family, and it was top ranked in one category for its low crime rate. This helped support our decision to move there.

The newspaper provided job information for my wife, information on real estate, as well as a sense of what goes on in the community. My wife found a part-time job relatively easily, thus easing our financial concerns, as well as providing her a point of contact to meet new people.

Finding a home or apartment that satisfies a family's living requirements can be one of the most important aspects of helping other family members find happiness in their new location. This is one thing that should not be left to chance. A poor living environment can create problems for a family trying to cooperate and work together through this kind of change. A home that requires immediate work or constant attention is probably not the ideal place for a new faculty member who will have limited free time to spend on these tasks. It is better to spend a little more or choose something smaller that is in good condition, not requiring a lot of updating and maintenance. This will leave free time for more important personal activities.

My wife and I had lived for most of our adult lives in apartments. One of the things we both desired was to purchase a home as part of our move and career change. The affordable housing in the area helped with this decision. Our own house would give us a common interest to pursue together in our limited free time. Knowing that during the first few years, my time would be very limited for home fix-up projects and repairs, we chose a well maintained home in move-in condition in a desirable neighborhood. This helped considerably in making the move easier. We have enjoyed and been fortunate to have a number of friends visit, have met several new friends in our neighborhood, and have hosted Thanksgiving with my wife's family.

VII. Scheduling Time for Personal Activities

It is important to schedule time for personal activities. Too often we tend to place greater significance on our professional commitments leaving our personal life to fit in wherever it can.

Many times the result is that the personal activities are cut short, postponed or cancelled. This sends the message to loved ones that they are less important than career goals. Considering both professional and personal activities when prioritizing and allocating time helps to give both sets of activities equal importance.

Keeping a balance between professional and personal activities requires the prioritization and scheduling of both activities simultaneously so that our professional and personal lives can coexist in harmony. This requires coordination of schedules of everyone in the family and utilizing flexibility in schedules, when needed. Dividing up household tasks is also important so the routine tasks get done without one person carrying all the burden of those tasks as well as leaving other free time available for more meaningful personal activities.

In adjusting to my professional activities, my wife has been very supportive. She understands the increased amount of work associated with a faculty position over my former consulting engineering position. We are both aware of each other's work schedule. She knows that Tuesday is my professional development day with no classes scheduled. Monday evenings are therefore good for shopping together when we need to make a decision about a major purchase. On several occasions I have chosen to work at home on a Tuesday to be able to spend some time with my wife during a week when she is working evenings. Scheduling household appointments on Tuesdays has also allowed me to be present for furniture deliveries and the plumber. The disadvantage is that I have to discipline myself and work for most of a weekend day or several evenings to make up the lost time.

Although we both work together on our long-term financial planning, my wife generally handles our day-to-day finances and household management. We have tried to split up other household chores as much as possible. For instance, my wife tends to write down our grocery list but we find it more efficient if I do the grocery shopping on my way home from the office.

Many of our personal activities have been planned to fit in around our work schedules. Owning our first home has provided many of these opportunities for sharing time as well as doing things individually. We have performed some activities like painting, yard work, gardening and decorating together, but other activities have been accomplished on our own. My wife has used some of the time on her own to decorate our home, which she has enjoyed very much.

Other planned activities have centered on meeting people and finding new interests and activities in the area. We have attended events for new faculty, campus cultural activities, various community festivals and attractions, and a neighborhood picnic. We have also tried to establish "date nights" where we leave behind the school, house and yard work and enjoy our time together. We have also explored volunteer opportunities in the area as a way of meeting people. One thing we are still struggling with is to reestablish a regular form of exercising together. These planned activities have worked well when our schedule permits.

Other times, unplanned activities have come up where we have been able to share time together. This occasionally has involved my work. One evening when we had planned to meet for dinner and go to a movie, I needed to prepare some soil for the following day's laboratory class. Instead of going to the movie that night, my wife joined me in the lab, weighing out the soil after

I had ground and sieved it. I think it gave her an appreciation of what I do in the lab, why my clothes are often dirty, and why a little dust in the house, basement or garage does not seem to bother me in the same way it bothers her.

One difficulty my wife and I face in scheduling our personal time together is that I am a morning person, typically being at my peak in the morning, while she is a not a morning person. Her work schedule helps perpetuate this. When she works evenings, she comes home and typically wants to talk, read or do things around the house. Whereas with my early mornings, I am ready to go to sleep. We try to use these times to satisfy our own personal needs for individual quiet time.

VIII. Scheduling Time for Professional Activities

In order to accommodate the demands of a faculty position, prioritization of one's professional activities is critical. Without prioritizing activities in some way, time will be used inefficiently and difficult tasks that need to be done will be passed over for less important but easier activities. Identifying those tasks most important to success in a faculty position is a key to being able to prioritize effectively. Reviewing the requirements for your position, the requirements for promotion and tenure and recommendations of senior faculty will guide you in determining which tasks should have the highest priority. It is important to write down the various academic activities that must be completed or need attention. From this "to do" list, the activities can be prioritized. Seeing what is out there to be done helps to keep focus on the priorities. As tasks are completed, they can be crossed off the list, providing a sense of accomplishment.

In my faculty position, prioritizing my professional activities has been relatively easy. Teaching is the prime function of my academic position. My lecture preparation is my top priority. Although it is recommended that no more than two hours of preparation time be allowed for each one hour of classroom time⁶, I have found that the three courses I am teaching this semester require different amounts of time for preparation. I am very familiar with one of the courses due to my graduate study and consulting experiences. This course has a laboratory that requires varying preparation time depending on the experiment being conducted, the condition of the equipment and the difficulty of the theories and procedures involved. Another course tends to have topics or themes that continue over several weeks requiring preparation for several class periods at one time. The third course is homework intensive with new topics or sequential topic development changing from class period to class period.

Identifying the potential to achieve multiple goals while conducting certain professional tasks is a way to use time on professional activities more effectively. Using short-term tasks like lecture preparation to help achieve long-term goals, such as professional paper development, is one example of this. In developing curriculum for your courses look for the possibilities of incorporating new ideas and techniques as well as practical experience. These not only will enhance your teaching, but they may also be worthy of documentation and presentation in a professional paper. Keep a notebook of those ideas for future reference. Also note feedback and suggestions from students about course content and materials. Referring to this notebook can save time when you revise your notes and teach the course again.

Other professional responsibilities include committee and departmental meetings, advising students and professional development. The committee and departmental meetings and student advising required a limited amount of time during this first semester. I expect the time required for these responsibilities to increase in the future. Senior faculty members have aided me in discovering opportunities for external professional development. They have directed me toward publishing opportunities such as with ASEE. Review of topics in various publications has also helped me see the potential for professional paper development within my course and curriculum development. Becoming aware of this early in your academic career will help save time later.

Continuing education activities have fit in well with my wife's schedule. Professional society meetings and a one-day short course conveniently occurred on evenings and a Saturday when my wife was working or had other commitments, thus not taking away from our personal time together.

Consulting opportunities will also be sources of professional development for new engineering faculty. This can be a significant way for faculty at small teaching institutions to stay current in their field. Finding the time to do this consulting during the academic year may be difficult for new faculty members. This type of professional development may be better scheduled during the summer. A priority during the first academic year should be for new faculty members to make contact with local engineering firms. This may lead to summer consulting opportunities as well as developing contacts for class field trips, guest speakers, and advising students regarding job placement.

In my situation, I am located close to my former employer. They have agreed to keep me on their staff in a part-time position. The intent is to allow me to consult with them next summer and in future academic years when my schedule permits. I have had limited time this fall to consult with them due to my teaching demands. I have been requested to do some additional work on a project I had worked on previously. It is difficult to find time to squeeze this consulting work into my schedule without giving up personal time.

To help maintain a balance between professional and personal activities, it is probably best to try to maintain a consistent work schedule. However, if other family members have work schedules that vary from week to week, it may help to adjust your work schedule to accommodate theirs, when possible. This will provide time for personal activities with other family members while leaving times when other family members are not available, for you to tend to professional responsibilities.

Coming from a consulting engineering position, initially I tried to maintain a normal workday schedule, being at the office from 7:30am to 5pm five days a week. My wife's work schedule involves working shifts that include some evenings and weekends. To give us more opportunities to share personal time together, I have tried to accommodate her schedule when possible. I have adjusted my schedule to allow us to spend time together while she is off and leaving some of my lecture preparation and most of my grading to times when she is working evenings or weekends. When working a full week at the office, I found that I still needed to bring work home, especially grading, but much of my work could be accomplished at the office.

Keeping daily records of how time was spent helps increase efficiency for new faculty⁶. I have attempted to keep a detailed schedule of my professional and personal activities this first semester. This is to help me document my activities in preparation for promotion and tenure, as well as help me see where I use and misuse my time. Although I am not always able to keep up with detailed documentation of my activities, a desk calendar helps me keep track of major activities.

One of the problems associated with time management is dealing with wasting short periods of time⁷. I have experienced difficulty efficiently using the time between classes, during office hours and while proctoring exams. Using those somewhat short and often broken up periods of time effectively is challenging. As a new faculty member trying to become familiar with the students, other faculty and the university, I find myself spending perhaps too much time scanning the student newspaper, reading faculty discussions on e-mail and tending to junk mail from the university, professional societies or other sources. Experienced educators recommend evaluating tasks such as these and eliminate any that are unnecessary⁸. It is not required to open and read all junk mail, nor are all departmental or university functions mandatory. It is important for new faculty to be involved in departmental and university activities, but be selective and attend those activities which are most beneficial to your goals and which can be accommodated by your schedule.

Performing professional activities at home requires special discipline. Difficulty results from miscommunication between family members. It is important to let others know in advance when activities must be completed on a given evening or weekend. Family members must also let each other know their plans and what things should be done together. If priorities are established together, it will be easier to determine which things should be done together and when.

When performing professional activities at home, an environment conducive to performing these tasks will increase productivity. It is recommended that some sort of home office be used where work can be performed relatively undisturbed. Using the dining room or kitchen table tends to hinder at-home work efficiency.

IX. Keeping the Balance: Good Days and Bad Days

Although we all intend to have a balance between our professional and personal lives, it is difficult to sustain that balance continuously. Some weeks or days are better than others. We must realize this and not let our bad days or weeks deter us. Professional activities may dominate during a week heavy with exams, committee meetings, consulting commitments, professional meetings or preparation for a complicated laboratory experiment. Other weeks professional time commitments may seem light by comparison. In our situation, my wife's schedule also contributes to the balance. In a week where she works several evenings and the weekend, time available to spend together is limited. My schedule is somewhat flexible, but I still have a fixed schedule of classes, office hours, and meetings that cannot be adjusted.

X. Summary

Balancing our professional and personal lives is difficult for everyone. The time we have is limited and we must use it wisely. Simultaneously prioritizing our professional and personal activities and goals helps us identify those things that must be accomplished and those that can wait or be given less time and attention. Identifying non-essential activities may lead to their elimination from our “to do” lists. Making a conscious effort to manage time wisely can be of long-term benefit by gradually modifying habits that waste time and other inefficiencies. Scheduling time to satisfy personal family commitments requires accommodations be made by all family members as their professional schedules allow. It also requires communication between family members regarding schedules, personal and professional commitments and long-term goals. Involving the entire family in the decision making process and including their comments and priorities in allocating professional and personal time will help everyone to achieve satisfaction in their personal activities. We must understand that when trying to achieve a balance between our professional and personal lives there will be good weeks when the balance is kept and bad weeks where an unbalance is almost unavoidable. If we strive to manage our time effectively and keep communicating to each other our priorities regarding our professional and personal lives, it is possible that over the long-term, a balance between professional and personal activities can be achieved and maintained. If we succeed at this, a rewarding professional career and a satisfying personal life can both be realized simultaneously.

Using a narrative format to share my experiences in accepting and beginning a new faculty position has allowed me to express how my professional and personal lives interact, and how I attempt to maintain a balance between the two. By using a first-person narrative to relate my experiences, I hope that those who read this paper are able to obtain meaning from these experiences. Sharing new ideas as well as common experiences with each other can help new engineering educators realize our personal and professional goals more efficiently.

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