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Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Balancing Studies and Career

Group Grateful Dead

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examines the perceptions of graduate students balancing studies and career. The initial qualitative study utilized a small focus group to discover concerns related to balancing graduate studies and employment. Five main themes were identified in the data analysis, and these themes were used in the development of a ten questions survey. The quantitative portion of the study included a cross-sectional survey administered online to a group of fifteen nurses currently enrolled in graduate studies. Data analysis from the survey responses revealed that the participants face challenges with time management along with increased fatigue, and stress. However, students also identified several strategies to maintain balance between career, scholastic, and personal responsibilities. The participants also indicated that they utilize knowledge and skills gained from graduate studies in their practice and that they remain committed and satisfied with their nursing position. These findings warrant further research to explore the effectiveness of specific time management strategies as well as to determine the impact of graduate studies on family life. The findings of this study and the above mentioned future studies may be valuable to nurses who are contemplating enrolling in graduate studies and to graduate advisors and administrators who counsel these students on such issues throughout their program of study.

*Keywords:* qualitative research, quantitative research, focus group, survey, graduate student perceptions, nursing career, graduate studies, time management challenges, time management strategies.

Graduate Students’ Perception of Balancing Studies and Career

The decision to undertake graduate studies may be based on the desire to enter a new professional field, to improve one’s current career, or simply to satisfy an intellectual curiosity.  However, graduate studies require a great deal of time and commitment, and this can be extremely challenging when paired with existing work, family, and personal commitments. There are high rates of attrition in graduate level programs and it is estimated that nearly 70% of students who enter distance education programs dropout permanently or temporarily before program completion (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Furst-Bowe, & Dittmann, 2001). Finding time to complete coursework in a schedule that is already full can prove to be a daunting if not an overwhelming challenge. Students who are employed while enrolled in distance education programs are often forced to use personal time to complete their studies and this can have a harmful effect on their home life and may contribute to attrition rates, even if they are performing well in their studies (Tyler-Smith, 2006; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Identifying perceptions of how students balance a career and graduate studies could assist universities in designing student centred programs that include support services to address these issues and in turn reduce stress and dropout rates (Altekruse & Brew, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to discover graduate students’ perceptions of balancing their course work and career. We hypothesized that nurses who are undertaking graduate studies will report increased levels of stress and fatigue along with challenges related to time management.   It was assumed that all participants were employed in nursing and enrolled in at least one graduate level course.

**Background**

A recent grounded theory study of doctoral students’ sought to explore perceptions of how full-time graduate students found “school-work-life” balance. From this study, four themes emerged as strategies used by the students to achieve and maintain balance between their school, work and life. These were purposefully managing their time and priorities; seeking wellbeing and managing mental and physical health (allowing for personal time); finding support from individuals and their institution; and by making tradeoffs. (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane, 2013).

Similarly, Kember (1999) conducted a study to examine processes that adult learners use to balance part-time distance education studies with their existing commitments. Support of family, friends, faculty, and employer, sacrifice, and negotiation of time for work, life, and study were identified as being important to successful time management (Kember, 1999).

Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos (2002) studied the root causes of dropout rates in one postgraduate course. The researchers found the main causes of dropping out stem from a combination of adult learners’ obligations, specifically balancing their academic workload with their employment commitments and family obligations. The second reason identified for attrition was students’ miscalculation of the available time for studying and their underestimation of the extra effort required for effective learning (Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos, 2002).

Finally, in a focus group study conducted by Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001), 40 female students in distance education programs, identified barriers to their success in the program. One of the significant barriers was time constraints with work, family and school. Many participants felt that their families and employers were verbally supportive of their pursuits in further education, but less flexible with the actual allowance of time to work on studies. Many respondents admitted to finding it necessary to drop out of their studies for a semester or longer due to time constraints (Furst and Dittmann, 2001).

**Lab 1**

Lab 1 is a qualitative analysis of graduate students’ responses collected from a focus group related to balancing their career and graduate studies. The purpose of lab 1 is to gain an increased understanding of the perceptions of graduate students from their personal experiences.

**Method**

Qualitative data was collected in order to discover the perceptions of nurses managing both work and graduate studies. A focus groups methodology was selected as the ideal method to gather the needed information. Focus groups allow for in-depth information to be collected about a specific topic in a reasonable amount of time, (Doody and Noonan, 2013). Purposeful sampling was employed as the participants were selected based on how much they could contribute to the topic (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). One focus group session was held consisting of five graduate students currently employed in nursing. Six non-directive questions guided the focus group session, which was edited by an expert in the field. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that all answers would remain confidential and used only for the purpose of the study. Participants were given sufficient time to answer the questions in order to add to the discussion and had the ability to seek clarification.

**Analysis**

Analysis of qualitative data involves using inductive reasoning to sort and categorize data into abstract underlying themes (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). Comparison analysis, consisting of three stages of coding, was used to gain an in-depth understanding of this topic. The first stage is called open coding in which data is grouped then assigned a code. The second stage, called axial coding, consists of categorizing data. The third and final stage is called selective coding where the development of themes occurs (Doody, Slevin, and Taggart, 2013). In the analysis all the responses were compiled based on their respective question and separated into common categories where themes were discovered and developed.

**Results**

The completion of an in-depth comparison analysis revealed several themes. All five participants identified that they were working either full-time or part-time in nursing while completing their graduate studies part-time. There were five main themes identified from the analysis which include: increased fatigue; difficulty with time management; impact on nursing career; job satisfaction; and strategies to help balance career and graduate studies.

Increased fatigue was a persistent concern as the participants identified that they became very fatigued trying to balance all of their commitments. As stated by participant A “typically I work on my course in the evening because I have little time to work on my studies at work. This is challenging because my evenings are busy at home as well... sometimes I am very tired and find it difficult to stay focused.”

Difficulty with time management was significant as it was identified that balancing both career and school was a challenge amongst all the participants. As shown by Participant B “I also find it challenging to balance time between work, school, family and home life. I feel as though I am focused so much on school and work that my family and home life suffer as a consequence.”

Impact on nursing career was both negative and positive. The negative impact was noted when school created increased stress or became very time consuming. This is evident in participant C’s statement “…right now I find that I am stressed during work as I am worrying about the amount of school work I need to complete. This results in me not enjoying work and using my breaks to catch up on school work instead of relaxing and interacting with my colleagues.” However, some were able to look beyond the negative impact and identified positive changes within their career since beginning graduate studies. Participant D expressed this as “I think my studies (positively) impact my nursing career…improving my practice by further educating myself by applying materials learning and self-reflection on my practice.”

There was also a positive and negative impact reported related to job satisfaction. When school pressures are high then satisfaction with work tends to decrease among the participants. Participant C stated, “I am more stressed overall with balancing school and work resulting in me not enjoying my time and work, and at times dreading having to go to work.” However, the participants did express the value of continuing their education and how knowledge gained has improved their job satisfaction. This was demonstrated in Participant A’s response, “in some respects it increases my job satisfaction as I feel I am better equipped to problem solve, develop and implement challenging projects, and communicate effectively.”

Strategies to help balance career and graduate studies arose as each participant identified many time management strategies. Three common strategies identified were developing a time management plan, utilizing work breaks and days off for studies, and family support. Every participant had time management strategies as shown by their responses: “I divide and plan my course work one week at a time” (Participant E); “Utilize my breaks, especially around a paper so that I ensure I get all my readings completed for my postings that week” (Participant C); “I talk to my family who are very supportive especially during more stressful times” (Participant A). As demonstrated in the discussion the common themes identified lead to a deeper understanding of this topic.

**Discussion**

One of the limitations of lab one was only doing one focus group and completing the research over a short time period thus decreasing the amount of data collected. The participants were small in number and all female making the results more difficult to generalize. Despite the aforementioned limits, useful data emerged from lab one. Coping mechanisms were identified to deal with the many challenges of balancing graduate studies and their careers. Participants were also able to see beyond the stress and anxiety by expressing the many benefits of furthering their education; this is evident throughout the responses. The theme of fatigue demonstrated how the participants struggled with their many commitments, and similarly, the theme of difficulty with time management demonstrated the many challenges of trying to balance career and studies without compromising either. Interestingly the themes regarding impact on nursing career and job satisfaction indicate mixed feelings as participants struggled with time constraints and stress of school, thus creating negative feelings. However, participants also identified how the knowledge gained through graduate studies resulted in positive outcomes, such as, enhancing future career options.  Finally, time management strategies were an important finding as the participants were committed to discovering and utilizing many different ways to ensure balance in order to meet their goals of career enhancement. This next phase of the study involves the exploration of graduate students’ perceptions through a quantitative analysis.

**Lab 2**

Lab 2 is the quantitative portion of the study and examines female graduate students’ responses collected from an online survey related to balancing graduate studies and employment. The purpose of lab 2 is to gain a better understanding of the challenges graduate students face while attempting to balance their studies and careers. Data collected from lab 2 summarizes and describes the responses from the survey using descriptive statistics to display the results.

**Method**

**Sample and Procedure.** Fifteen female graduate students in a health related Masters program at Athabasca University were selected to participate in the study. Of these female graduate students, one student was enrolled in full time studies, while the other fourteen participants were enrolled in part time studies. 73% of the participants were employed full time, whereas the remaining 27% were employed part time. Purposeful sampling was employed as this study was focused on the perceptions of graduate students balancing their career and studies, and required contributions from this specific population.

**Research design and measures.** A cross-sectional survey design was employed. This method allows for capturing a snapshot of a specific population at a given point in time (Roberts, 2012). Data was collected using of an online survey. A ten question survey was designed based on the five main themes identified from the focus groups results of lab 1. To determine the validity of the instrument, the survey questions were reviewed by an expert and revised accordingly. Information was also provided to the participants about the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that confidentiality of responses would be maintained.

**Analysis**

All 15 participants completed the survey resulting in a 100% response rate. Each participant answered all of the survey questions and no data was found to be missing. Data from the survey was analyzed using frequencies and reported in the results as a percentage value to compare, describe, and summarize the results. For the questions referring to challenges and time management strategies, where multiple answers were possible, the mode and the range were used to identify significant challenges and effective time management strategies.

**Results**

The quantitative data analysis in lab two revealed several recurrent themes within the participants’ answers. Knowledge application, job commitment, and satisfaction were the first identified themes. The results showed 67% of students identified they sometimes utilize knowledge from graduate studies in practice, while the remaining 33% of participants apply this knowledge often in practice. Notably, none of the participants expressed that they did not use knowledge gained from graduate studies in practice.

Many participants (67%) felt their commitment to their career has remained the same since starting graduate studies, while 33% felt they had less of a commitment to their career. The majority (53%) of participants expressed they were satisfied with their job since starting graduate studies, while 27% felt there was no change to their job satisfaction. Finally, 13% of participants were very satisfied and 7% felt dissatisfied with their job since starting graduate studies.

Participants were asked to identify several specific challenges faced when enrolled in graduate studies while employed (See Figure 1). The mode, the most prevalent concern identified, was not enough personal time. The range between the challenges of not enough personal time (93%) and decreased motivation for work (27%) is 66%. This large spread identifies the significant challenge of time management while completing graduate studies and working simultaneously. Most significantly, there were no participants who reported they did not face any challenges with balancing work and graduate studies. The majority of students (87%) reported increased fatigue while working and completing graduate studies, as opposed to focusing only on their career. Balancing time between work, studies, and personal time was also an identified concern; 60% of participants expressed this was difficult, 33% identified this as very difficult, while only 7% reported this as easy (see Figure 2).

Graduate students identified various strategies utilized to maintain balance between work and studies. The most prevalent strategy implemented by students was to utilize their days off to complete school work (87%). Other strategies identified by participants were family help with personal commitments (73%), making a weekly plan for school (67%) and using breaks at work for school work (47%). Some also found working less and changing shifts (33%), and organizing days off of work (13%) provided an opportunity to work on studies. Participants felt their family and friends were supportive (53%) or very supportive (47%) of their decision to undertake graduate studies while working.

**Discussion**

Limitations of the quantitative study include all of the fifteen participants were female and enrolled at the same university, thereby reducing the external validity of the study. The results revealed that students enrolled in graduate studies while employed face challenges with time management, and increased levels of fatigue and stress. Although participants identified many challenges, they also identified strategies utilized to maintain balance between career and school. However, many participants still reported feelings of stress and fatigue despite the use of time management strategies. Most participants were able to apply knowledge from graduate studies to their current nursing practice, and the majority remained satisfied with their job. The results of lab two reveal valuable information for nurses who are currently employed and are contemplating continuing their education. These results provide insight into possible challenges as well as potential coping strategies identified by graduate students sharing similar experiences.

**Integration and Synthesis of Findings**

Completion of both the qualitative and quantitative portions of this study revealed many similarities in the results. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that increased fatigued and difficulty with time management was a challenge when balancing a career with graduate studies. Two main concerns that were evident in the results from both labs were lack of personal time and managing time for family, school, and career. Interestingly, both labs identified a recurring theme of both a positive and negative impact on their career and job satisfaction. When school was busy, thus creating more stress and less time for family or work, the participants identified negative impacts on career and job satisfaction. This was also evident in the survey results as participants identified challenges with managing time between their commitments for school and work and also a decreased motivation for work. However, the participants found positive aspects of managing school and career as they identified the ability to use knowledge from their graduate studies in their practice. Finally, results from both labs identified many of the same strategies in order to deal with the challenge of balancing career and graduate studies. The most prevalent strategies reported include utilization of days off for school work, family support, and preparing a time management plan.

This study as a whole has identified many common and recurring themes thus proving that balancing both career and graduate studies poses many challenges. Overall, the main issue identified is dividing time between varying commitments while ensuring all areas get the attention they deserve. However, graduate students felt the opportunity to increase and apply knowledge and possibly improve future career options resulted in increased job satisfaction and commitment. Perceptions of balancing both career and graduate studies yielded mixed emotions but ultimately the results demonstrated that graduate students face many challenges while trying to balance their career with their studies and further research into additional support would be helpful.

An area identified for further research involves studying the effectiveness of time management strategies. Although graduate students reported use of specific time management strategies they still reported feelings of stress and fatigue. A future study aimed at identifying which time management strategies are most effective at reducing feelings of stress and fatigue would assist graduate students to better cope with balancing their career and studies. All participants reported challenges with balancing their careers and studies. However, many participants in both labs reported that they also found it challenging to balance family commitments with their studies. Further research is required to assess the impact of graduate studies on family life. The focus of the study should also include identifying beneficial coping mechanisms and supports as these strategies would be useful for prospective and current students struggling with these issues. This would also be relevant information for universities as they could potentially reduce attrition rates by putting supports in place to better assist graduate students to cope with these issues. Finally, an aspect that was not examined in this study was the perception of male graduate students. This important perspective should be included in future studies to provide a broader scope of experiences and challenges associated with undertaking graduate studies while working. Incorporation of both the male and female perspective is essential for universities considering implications based on the findings of this study.

The implications of findings in this research study provide insight to the challenges of balancing career and graduate studies. Adaptation of the evidence to local context, assessing barriers to knowledge use, and tailoring, selecting, and implementing interventions are the guidelines of the knowledge to action framework model (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2012). These phases outline the process of utilizing research findings and implementing them to practice. The findings of our research acknowledge there are challenges which may occur, but also strategies which may be beneficial to students. Identifying strategies provides guidance and suggestions to others. Potential implications for universities include making support services available for current and prospective students as this may assist students facing challenges and reduce attrition rates.  The perceptions of the participants provided valuable insight into the challenges of time management faced by graduate students and most definitely support further research in this area.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that nurses who are completing graduate studies face significant challenges with the integration of study requirements into their already demanding work schedules. They experience increased levels of stress and fatigue and often sacrifice days off and personal time for the completion of school work. However, the majority of nurses feel that they apply knowledge from their studies in their practice, and the overall level of job commitment remains the same. Although further studies would be helpful for generalizability, our results may be useful to nurses who are contemplating graduate studies or to program advisors who counsel these students. If employed nurses enter the program with a well informed idea of the challenges that lie ahead, perhaps they will be better prepared to handle them and less likely to withdraw from the program.

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*Figure 1.* Challenges faced by graduate students while trying to balance work and studies reported in the online survey administered in lab 2.

*Figure 2.* The percentage of graduate students who identified their perceived level of difficulty associated with balancing time between work, school and family as reported in the online survey in lab 2.