

Understanding the Work/Life Balance of Student-Mothers in Online Graduate Programs

Michelle Covert
The Pennsylvania State University

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Abstract: This qualitative study presents an overview of the work/life balance of four student-mothers in online graduate programs focusing on issues such as feelings of tiredness, guilt, and being overwhelmed, support from spouses, division of household labor, homework interruptions, and children's well-being.

Moore and Kearsley (2012) relay that the majority of distance education students are between the ages of 25 and 50, which happens to be the prime child-rearing years for women. Accordingly, graduate student-women, who want a family as well as a career, have difficult decisions to make regarding their personal and professional lives. They can decide to put off starting a family until degree completion in favor of trying at an older age and at a time when their careers are beginning, or they can juggle motherhood and graduate studies.

This difficult decision exists because, even through all of our strides in gender equality over the last 100 years or so, women still tend to be the primary caregivers of children and other dependent family members and are often in charge of overseeing and completing nearly all household chores (Kramarae, 2000; Mason & Ekman, 2007; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002). This is also true of working women and female graduate students, causing role-strain and issues with work/life balance.

This study seeks to answer the question: How do student-mothers balance their online graduate schoolwork with their family and paid work?

Research Problem

Student-mothers in online graduate programs are something of an enigma. Although there is an abundant amount of data concerning their counterparts in traditional graduate programs and of working women in general, there is not yet a full understanding of how these particular students balance work, school, and family. We also do not know why women in online graduate programs balance the various aspects of their lives in the ways that they do or if there is a trend in how they go about doing so. Finally, more information is needed about themes that have emerged in the existing literature that have not been fully explored such as the role of emotional support from spouses or partners and the effect of feelings of guilt on decision-making, persistence, and success.

Methods

In order to develop a deep and rich understanding of the work/life balance of student-mothers in online graduate programs, I conducted a qualitative study using a life history/narrative approach with aspects of phenomenology. The study focused on the ways each participant balances the major aspects of their lives: their online programs, their paid employment, their home and family life, their extended family, and their social lives. I found that the best way for participants

in this study to parlay this information was by describing their everyday lives during audio-recorded phone interviews and through journaling.

Findings

The women in this study all share one overwhelming state of being: they are tired. They also share one paramount concern: their children's wellbeing. Along with being chronically tired, the student-mothers expressed a number of other feelings and issues. They feel overwhelmed by their schoolwork and as if they have a lot to balance at once with very little time to do so. The participants also described their feelings of guilt brought on by their struggles with balancing work, school, and family. Additionally, the student-mothers found interruptions while they are doing schoolwork to be an issue. The interruptions that they face complicate their feelings of guilt over neglecting their families with their desire to get their schoolwork done at home. An underlying theme throughout the conversations and journal entries, relayed by every participant, is the importance of their partners' support and help as they attempt to balance household chores and childcare with school and paid work.

Discussion

Women are entering into online graduate programs in record numbers each year with no slow down in sight. It is imperative, for their sake as well as that of the universities that enroll them, that they are understood. University administrators must embrace the idea that students are not one-dimensional. They must consider them holistically, especially institutions offering online programs. In no other educational context is the student's home, family, and work such a dominant presence in the classroom.

Although this study shows many similarities between student-mothers in traditional graduate programs as well as working women in general—i.e. they feel guilt about their work/life balance decisions, they require a supportive spouse (if in a couple), they place their children's needs first—it highlights the importance of continued research into the work/life balance of student-mothers in online graduate programs by illuminating the unique issues they face and the feelings associated with them.

References

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