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Work-Life Balance for New Counselor Educators: Recommendations From Experienced Counselor Educators

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Abstract

Transitioning from a doctoral program into a full-time counselor education position can be challenging. With multiple and competing professional demands that include teaching, research, supervision, and service, new counselor educators may struggle with adopting their new professional roles and competing personal responsibilities. The literature on work-life balance (WLB) focuses on the experiences of counselor educators on defining and obtaining WLB; however recommendations for future professionals in achieving WLB is not presently available. This qualitative study explored the transcription reflections of 27 counselor educators regarding their recommendations for new professionals in achieving WLB. For this study, WLB is the ability to manage both personal and professional responsibilities while maintaining life satisfaction. Participants addressed three major themes: challenges, strategies utilized, and recommendations for future professionals. Subthemes included time management, conflict, other people's expectations of productivity, professional strategies, personal strategies, individual strategies, professional recommendations, personal recommendations, and individual recommendations. The themes obtained from this study are relevant for WLB research, academia, and new professionals. Recommendations for administrators and counselor educators are included.

The counseling profession is grounded in traditions that promote personal development, including the ability to successfully manage transitions, cope with stressful situations, and achieve career satisfaction for clients and professionals (Magnuson, 2002).

One may assume that new counselor education faculty are inducted into environments that are conducive to success and satisfaction related to these foundational education teachings (Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004), yet counselor education programs have not fully addressed the myriad adjustment issues experienced by new assistant professors within their programs (Magnuson, 2002). Additional attention should be paid to the occupational satisfaction of new counselor educators in their first years due to the isomorphic relationship between counselor educator-counselor and counselor-client (Hill, 2004). Navigating the first years as a pre-tenured faculty member in counselor education is critical to the success and satisfaction in an academic career; however, this can also be one of the most stressful periods of an individual's career (Magnuson et al., 2004; Sorcinelli, 1994). In addition to work demands, new faculty may also struggle with balancing professional demands with personal responsibilities including relationship and family obligations (Evans, Dickerson, & Carney, 2014). Work-life balance (WLB) is defined as a person's attempt to manage professional and personal responsibilities while maintaining satisfaction across these multiple roles (Evans, Carney, & Wilkinson, 2013; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). WLB includes family and work expectations in addition to other activities that the individual identifies as meaningful including relationships with friends and leisure activities (Authors, masked, 2013; Philipsen, 2010). WLB can be challenging for all professionals, but new professionals may experience additional WLB challenges due to recent transitions and increasing workload expectations. Within those first few years, new counselor educators may experience higher levels of stress, dissatisfaction, and loneliness, among other challenges, and call for greater care from their respective institutions (Magnuson et al., 2004). In addition, the challenges experienced by new faculty may potentially lead to lower productivity, decreased student interactions, and decreased involvement in departmental issues (Hill, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenological experiences of tenure-track and tenured counselor education faculty to identify themes and recommendations for future counselor educators regarding WLB.

Challenges

Counselor education faculty members face unique challenges within their first years as a professor. Although challenges may seem to affect only the individual, the challenges in fact create problems for the academic institution and the counselor education department, as well as the students (Hill, 2004). Within counselor education departments, first-year faculty members consistently reference challenges such as overwhelming workload, role overload, and self-imposed pressure to perform well in all aspects of one's life, both personal and professional (Shillingford, Trice-Black, & Butler, 2013; Sorcinelli, 1994). Additionally, as a new faculty member, counselor educators may feel occupational strain related to the high expectations set forth by their department and lack of clarity related to academic success and tenure (Hill, 2004; Shillingford et al., 2013). A major source of stress can also be derived from administrators who may intentionally or unintentionally assign excessive workloads in the first year as well as provide insufficient mentoring for new counselor education faculty (Sorcinelli, 1994).

During their first year, new faculty members are continuously pulled in various directions, and feelings of uneasiness are not uncommon. New counselor education

faculty especially do not like to feel that their time is being wasted (Hill, 2004), as a major contributor of stress stems from lack of time to adequately adhere to all roles and tasks set forth for the new faculty member (Sorcinelli, 1994). In addition to time management, there are a plethora of stresses and challenges acknowledged by first-year counselor education faculty members. New course preparation and high teaching loads, ambiguous or unstated requirements for tenure and promotion, faculty conflict, inadequate resources, lack of funding, service responsibilities, university politics, inadequate feedback and recognition, lack of financial reward, lack of time and energy for family social activities, isolation, lack of collegial support, and a sense of overall unrealistic expectations set forth are predominant sources of stress expressed as a concern by first-year counselor education faculty members (Hill, 2004; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson et al., 2004; Magnuson, Norem, & Lonneman-Doroff, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994; Shillingford et al., 2013). Another area of concern and stress experienced by new faculty is the process of annual evaluations (Magnuson, 2002; Shillingford et al., 2013). Although not all new faculty will experience each of these challenges presented, it is important for counselor education departments to recognize these stressors and provide adequate support to new faculty members. New faculty members encounter more negative spillover, which occurs when strain and conflict in one domain (work or family) negatively affect an individual's mood and behavior in the other domain (Roehling, Jarvis, & Swope, 2005), than do experienced, tenured faculty members (Sorcinelli, 1994), which makes departmental support of the utmost importance in new faculty development.

Collegial Support

A prominent theme that has emerged as significant for first-year counselor education faculty is the importance of collegial support. Collegial support is an important aspect of a first-year faculty's success in academia as it provides intellectual and social support to the newest members of a department (Sorcinelli, 1994). First-year faculty members have previously expressed that alienation and isolation have led to an increase in stress (Shillingford et al., 2013). Many first-year faculty members are relocating to new cities and universities and establishing themselves as educators and have expressed a desire for more collegial support from senior faculty members (Sorcinelli, 1994). Many first-year faculty members are surprised by the unanticipated challenge of lack of collegial support (Hill, 2004), and it has been suggested that these new faculty members would benefit from a more collegial, intellectually supportive environment (Sorcinelli, 1994). An increase in support from higher-level faculty members would be beneficial to the growth and development of new faculty. Research consistently reports that collegial support, whether formal or informal, from veteran faculty is requested and valued by pre-tenured new counselor education faculty members as well as a need for more structured mentoring programs for new faculty (Hill, 2004; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson et al., 2009). The future of our success as a profession relies on the willingness of veteran faculty members to provide collegial support to new faculty (Sorcinelli, 1994).

Female Faculty and Minorities

Women and minorities within counselor education departments are of special concern as they may face additional challenges that influence occupational and life satisfaction (Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley, & Hazler, 2005; Shillingford et al., 2013). As the

number of women and minorities in faculty positions continues to grow (Shillingford et al., 2013), it is important to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by these individuals as they adjust to a life in higher education (Sorcinelli, 1994). For example, minority female faculty must not only deal with the common challenges but may also encounter racial stereotypes, stigmatizations, and a lack of trust from students (Shillingford et al., 2013). It is imperative that counselor education departments understand and respond to the differential experiences of females and minorities in their departments to ensure positive work satisfaction as well as faculty retention (Shillingford et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2005). These concerns, in addition to the aforementioned challenges in regards to work overload, suggest the need to closely examine and monitor minority and female counselor educators and the influence these challenges place on their personal and professional welfare (Shillingford et al., 2013).

Method

Phenomenological studies tend to focus on the experiences people have within a given context (McLeod, 2011). Additionally, phenomenological studies allow for researchers to explore multiple realities within the same situation. When participants are provided the opportunity to explore their own perspective, it allows for researchers to closely examine individual realities (Hays & Wood, 2011). To accomplish the goal of capturing multiple perspectives within the same context of work-life balance, the researchers utilized a phenomenological research study. More specifically, this approach allowed for the researchers to closely examine the meaning behind each individual's response and the context in which the data was collected.

Participants

This study collected phenomenological data from 27 participants. The participants were primarily Caucasian ($n=20$, 74%), then African-American ($n=5$, 17%) Latino/Hispanic ($n=1$, 3%) and Multiracial ($n=1$, 3%). Gender was also collected for this study, however the majority of participants chose not to identify their gender. Of the participants that chose to include their gender, 4 were female and 4 were male. Other demographic information that was collected included marital status. The majority of participants disclosed that they were married ($n=19$, 70%), and the remaining 30% of the participants' relationship status was broken down in the following ways: single ($n=5$, 17%), partnered ($n=2$, 7%), and divorced ($n=1$, 3%). Participants also disclosed information about their children. Out of the 27 participants, 19 (70%) indicated that they do have children, 6 reported having one child (23%), 8 reported having two children (31%), 2 reported having three children (8%), 2 reported having four or more children (8%), and 6 (23%) reported that they did not have any children. Lastly, the participants answered questions regarding their academic appointment and rank. Twenty-two participants (81%) indicated that they held a position as an instructor/professor, 4 (15%) were adjunct faculty, and 1 (4%) was an administrator. In regards to academic rank, participants indicated that 5 (21%) were full professors, 8 (33%) were associate professors, 8 (33%) were assistant professors, and 3 (13%) were non-tenure track instructors. Lastly, 24 (92%) of the respondents indicated that they were employed at a CACREP-accredited institution.

Data Collection

To collect demographic information, a secure online program was used to post one primary and two stimulus questions. The collection of demographic information included asking participants to answer questions surrounding their race, partner status, parenthood status, tenure status, academic appointment, and whether the counseling program they are associated with is CACREP accredited. For the current study, the main research question was, describe your experiences as a counselor educator. The stimulus questions were: 1) what challenges have you experienced in obtaining and maintaining work-life balance?; 2) describe the strategies you have utilized to obtain and maintain work-life balance; and 3) what recommendations do you have for new counselor educators regarding work-life balance?

To gain participants, the current study made use of a targeted online mailing group. To increase the rate of validity within the study, participants were randomly selected through targeted e-mails and counselor education program resources. The randomly selected counselor educators were asked to participate in the online study through e-mail. The e-mail that potential participants received included a Qualtrics link that provided participants with an informed consent document and the qualitative research questions.

Research Lens

The lens of the current study evolved from personal experiences. The researchers on this study are all counselor educators who were married, heterosexual, mothers, and all were experiencing work-life balance challenges. The first author was a tenure-track assistant professor with one child. The second author was a second-year doctoral student with one child. The third author was a third-year doctoral student with twins. After discussions surrounding the study, the researchers felt that their experiences with work-life balance would help them construct themes for the current study. Using previously collected data from a former study, these researchers analyzed the data, journals, and responses to identify the following themes. These themes were then presented to an outside reader. Even though an outside reader was used, the researchers acknowledge that biases by them could still be present and is one of the challenges stated in the literature in having a study focused on work-life balance (Comer, 2009). To counteract researchers' biases, a bracketing technique was employed. Bracketing for specific responses was used so favoritism for participants' answers would not be a concern and to guarantee that participants' responses were interpreted independent of researcher experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011; Wertz, 2005).

Data Analysis

Focusing on the process questions, a bracketing technique was employed to assist in this study's data analysis by providing a context to identify repetition and provide structure (Hays & Wood, 2011). The researchers in this study bracketed their experiences, identified repetitive statements, grouped meaning statements, and sought multiple realities (Moustakas, 1994). In an effort to suspend infusing their judgments into

the data interpretation, the researchers utilized journaling techniques to ensure the division of personal experiences with data interpretation. Transcripts were reviewed three times. For the first review, the researchers read each response closely in an effort to understand the respondents' statements (Wertz, 2005). During the second reading, prominent statements were underlined, and during the third reading, themes or categories were identified. Following Wertz's (2005) recommendations, the original themes identified in the data were discussed and relationships were identified. Ultimately the goal of data interpretation was to "integrate these meanings into a single exhaustive description of the phenomenon," (McLeod, 2011, p. 89).

A Duquesne approach was utilized to interpret the data for this research study. The Duquesne approach is a qualitative analysis method developed in the 1960s that was spearheaded by Amadeo Giorgi (McLeod, 2011). Using semi-structured interviews (i.e., transcription responses to process questions), emerging themes and categories were identified. The researchers immersed themselves into the data and were conscientious of horizontality (McLeod, 2011). "The researcher attunes himself or herself particularly to the meaning of objects and events as they are lived by the subject" (McLeod, 2011, p. 90). After immersing and analyzing the data over time, the following themes were noted.

Results

There were three themes identified through the analysis of transcripts including challenges, strategies utilized, and recommendations for future professionals. Subthemes included time management, conflict, other people's expectations of productivity, professional strategies, personal strategies, individual strategies, professional recommendations, personal recommendations, and individual recommendations. Each theme and subtheme is described in more detail below.

Challenges Experienced in Obtaining and Maintaining WLB

In identifying challenges experienced by counselor education faculty in obtaining and maintaining work-life balance, the following themes were identified through the analysis of transcripts.

Time. Participants noted that balancing work demands with family responsibilities was challenging, especially in the context of time. As time is finite, participants reported experiencing challenges with time management including setting boundaries with work demands and balancing multiple job expectations. Oftentimes, subjects stated that they struggled to achieve balance between family/personal time and work obligations. One subject shared, "Work is extremely demanding. I often miss things in my children's lives, and my wife is often unhappy that I am gone so much." Another subject said,

Being single, I am not only responsible for maintaining a job to pay all of my own bills, but I also have to find time to get all of my own groceries, cook all of my own food, clean my house, do all my own laundry, etc. Anything that has to get done, I have to do it. There is no one to help me, either with time management, task management, or financial support. I have to do it all, and most of the time, there just isn't enough time.

Conflict. Subjects reported that a significant challenge in obtaining and maintaining work-life balance is when family/personal and work obligations collide. According to the counselor educators polled, conflict occurs in the workplace when the professional is asked to balance multiple and competing roles. In one's personal life, conflict occurs when work obligations interfere or trump personal responsibilities. Examples of this include thinking about work on personal time and negotiating between attending personal/family events during the workweek. One participant shared, "Challenges have been feeling spread too thin, feelings as if I cannot do all things well – like some things are sacrificed for the sake of other things, and feeling subsequent guilt." Another subject said,

Teaching night classes interferes with school meetings and homework time for my children. I have had to cancel class when my children are sick. I don't take sick days at work because I need to save those in case my children get sick.

Others' perceptions of productivity. Finally, respondents said that a challenge of obtaining and maintain work-life balance was coping with how others may perceive their professional productivity or lack thereof. Subjects referred to coworkers when reflecting on their efforts to balance work and personal obligations. One respondent stated,

The greatest challenge is taking care of myself and my family, which I believe is essential for all workers, but particularly salient for counselor educators who have an ethical responsibility to do so in order to model balance to students who are supervising counselors-in-training. Despite this, I find many counselor educators prioritize work goals, work identity, and appeasing an ego, over self care. So the most significant challenge is to have confidence in my choices to balance work and life. Older men in this profession present the biggest barrier to supporting the work-life balance in my experience. I feel challenged each time I discuss a choice to spend time with my family rather than work on the weekend. This tends to happen with older male colleagues, or single female colleagues.

Another subject shared, "Expectations by my program and administration, my own guilt for not fulfilling either rule well, and childcare if I must attend to work functions during "off time."

Strategies Utilized

Counselor educator participants described the following strategies they have utilized to obtain and maintain work-life balance. Reviewing these transcripts, three major themes emerged: 1) work life strategies, 2) personal life strategies, and 3) individual strategies.

Professional strategies. Subjects shared work strategies to obtain and maintain work-life balance. Strategies included working part-time, saying no to projects, working from home, implementing organization techniques (e.g., to-do lists), implementing time management strategies, asking for help from senior administrators, collaborating with peers, seeking support for colleagues, planning for the future when setting goals, offering blended class formats, using technology to work from home or participate in meetings from a distance, prioritizing work responsibilities that need completing versus tasks the individuals want completed, setting boundaries with colleagues, and scheduling

sabbaticals. One subject reported, “Organization and separation of responsibilities. Saying no to additional opportunities and responsibilities. Time management skills and prioritizing.”

Personal strategies. Subjects shared personal strategies to obtain and maintain work-life balance. Strategies included scheduling time to spend with family and friends, taking care of pets, scheduling one day to complete all personal chores (e.g., grocery shopping, laundry, etc.), adjusting one’s work schedule to accommodate family time, reflecting with family/friends regarding how the counselor educator balances work life, and attending marriage counseling. One subject shared,

I cluster book my work schedule. I teach 2/3 Friday nights and all day Saturdays, so I give myself Wednesdays off. I schedule my personal life and then most everything else around my schedule. I rarely deviate from my personal time, so I do not become overwhelmed and burned out.

Individual strategies. Subjects shared individual strategies to obtain and maintain work-life balance. Strategies included seeking counseling, exercising, eating healthy, attending art shows, going on vacations, reading novels, spending time outdoors, staying away from negative people, laughing a lot, and meditating. One participant stated,

1) I made a list of things I MUST do to maintain my health—and remain dedicated to those things; 2) I distinguish between the things I need and the things I like; 3) I use Steven Convey’s ‘7 Habits of Highly Effective People’ as a framework for creating balance in my life; 4) I almost always partner with someone for scholarship projects; it helps to engage my learning style/personality type; 5) I have become better at tactfully saying no.

Recommendations for Future Educators

Counselor educator participants described the following recommendations they have for new counselor educators regarding work-life balance. Reviewing these transcripts, three major themes emerged: 1) work life recommendations, 2) personal life recommendations, and 3) individual recommendations.

Professional recommendations. Participants reported professional recommendations for new faculty regarding work-life balance. Suggestions included drawing good boundaries, refusing to pursue administrative positions unless this is a passion for the individual, organizing and managing one’s time effectively, processing workplace dynamics with colleagues, seeking out mentors who value work-life balance, accepting the untraditional demands in a faculty position (e.g., working more than 40 hours, lower pay, acknowledging the ebb and flow of the job), sitting down with a senior faculty member to plan for the tenure process, being open to feedback from administration/peers and asking for help when it’s needed. One subject said, “Do what you need to do to get tenure, but don’t sell yourself out for your job.”

Personal recommendations. Participants reported personal recommendations for new faculty regarding work-life balance. Suggestions included deciding one’s personal values and pursuing these in life, waiting to have children, deciding with family and friends how to include personal responsibilities into career plans, scheduling time to spend with family/friends, and maintaining open communication with partners/significant people in one’s life.

Individual recommendations. Participants reported individual recommendations for new faculty regarding work-life balance. Suggestions included finding personal balance as this can be different for each individual, finding a way to get ‘me time’ each day, developing healthy eating habits, learning to laugh, avoiding discussing how stressed you are in the moment, reflecting on your values and only choosing an academic position that aligns with your values, scheduling time to engage in leisure activities that bring you pleasure, exercising, remaining curious, practicing self-care, forgiving yourself when all things are not completed well, and remaining mindful not to take yourself too seriously. One subject shared,

Driving to work today I saw a bumper sticker that read ‘You only have one life. Live it.’ This is the advice I have for new counselor educators – you only have one life – be sure to remember to live it while doing the work you love.

Another participant said, “Make the self a priority. We teach student counselors about self-care being a priority and must model this behavior to them.”

Discussion

This study intended to examine the recommendations of seasoned counselor educators for new counselor educators regarding issues related to WLB. The results from this study suggest there are inevitable challenges for all counselor educators; however, these may be addressed through strategies and recommendations from professionals who overcame these challenges. This study found that counseling professionals conceptualize WLB from professional, personal, and individual paradigms. Furthermore, recommendations addressed the need to emphasize these three constructs in achieving WLB. As previously noted, faculty experience challenges in WLB and managing multiple obligations both personally and professionally, and this is especially relevant for new faculty (Reddick, Rochlen, Grasso, Reilly, & Spikes, 2012).

The difficulties of managing faculty responsibilities with personal obligations is well documented (Armenti, 2004; Matheson & Rosen, 2012; Reddick et al., 2012; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). However, the research is limited on WLB in counselor education. Although wellness and self-care are emphasized in counseling training programs, this topic may not extend to practicing counselor educators. Research is scant on addressing or improving WLB across academia and counselor education. It is necessary that the counselor education profession examine how to integrate WLB into faculty performance evaluation and tenure consideration.

Limitations

This study explored the WLB recommendations for new counselor educators. While the information gleaned in this study is relevant, it is important to remember that these findings are not generalizable to all counselor educators. Although there was some diversity among the sample of participants, the absence of clear gender data is a limitation. Finally, subject responses were combined for this study for comparison; however, WLB is a complex topic and the themes presented may not be adequate to provide readers with a rich and in-depth understanding of this topic. Researchers are encouraged to consider WLB in counselor education and adding to the research base.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

The results from this study are relevant to counselor educators, higher education administration, and career development professionals. First, new counselor educators may want to consider how these findings influence their WLB goals. Using the strategies provided, new counselor educators can plan for some WLB challenges and incorporate interventions. In addition, seasoned faculty can mentor new faculty in incorporating WLB in their educational and professional practices (Matheson & Rosen, 2012). In turn, counselor educators may also want to incorporate WLB training and discussions into the counseling classroom (Lawson & Myers, 2011).

Satisfied and unsatisfied faculty within counselor education departments offered advice to ensure departmental development of first-year faculty members. In relation to confidence, successful experiences within the first year related to increased confidence among new faculty (Magnuson et al., 2004). Further, a positive work environment that contained collegial support for new faculty was admired (Magnuson et al., 2004; Sorcinelli, 1994). New counselor education faculty members responded positively when expectations and requirements were stated upfront in relation to tenure and promotion (Magnuson et al., 2004). In departments that boast an involved, supportive Departmental Chair who assigns courses based on interests, secures funds for travel, and provides guidance for annual reviews, new faculty were more satisfied and successful (Sorcinelli, 1994). Further, programs that have resources such as an equipment library, counseling lab, and technologically advanced classrooms increased new faculty satisfaction (Sorcinelli, 1994). Of utmost importance is the feeling of pleasure derived from the new faculty in terms of advancing the field of counseling. Satisfied counselor educators find pleasure in teaching students and contributing to the counseling field through research, writing, and improving counselor education programs (Magnuson et al., 2009). In order to promote and educate well counselors, counselor educators must be satisfied and in tune with all aspects of their lives.

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