

Balancing Priorities in the Academic Workplace

Summary of a discussion group at the
DIALOG VII Symposium

Susanne Menden-Deuer* and Nicky J. Grigg^

* Shannon Point Marine Center, Anacortes, Washington 98221, USA

^ CSIRO Land and Water, GPO Box 1666, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia

Introduction

The shock to many recent Ph.D.s is immense. After an epoch or at least an age that deserves to be graced by its own name, the studentocene or at least the defendian, there is a rich, academic life beyond graduate school and a world of possibilities. One of these wonderful possibilities is a weeklong, invitation-only symposium, aptly named DIALOG: Dissertations Initiative for the advancement of Limnology and Oceanography Program (see <http://also.org/phd.html>). This symposium series is organized by Dr. Sue Weiler, funded by several Federal agencies and cosponsored by many aquatic-science societies.

During the symposia, participants engage in a wide variety of exercises in addition to presenting their current and past research orally and as posters. During the 2005 incarnation of DIALOG (DIALOG VII, held Dec. 3 – 10, 2005 at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab), participants were invited to develop a list of topics they would benefit from discussing in small groups.

Here we report the outcome and summary of a discussion group addressing the question on how to best balance the opportunities and responsibilities in a new academic position. Academic research or even post-doctoral positions are full of wonderful possibilities both in the research and teaching arenas. However, it can be a challenge to choose among the many attractive opportunities. Moreover, the newly hired face a number of novel responsibilities, such as committee appointments and administrative work. While not required, postdocs may wish to volunteer for these responsibilities to gain valuable experience.

The goal of this discussion was to help identify ways to establish priorities and means to enforce those priorities against a background of considerable demands both at home and work. This discussion was explicitly focused on work-related issues, rather than balancing work and family life, which are equally demanding and challenging. We were concerned with how to set priorities when teaching, research, administrative duties and service all demand attention during working hours. We asked: should you write that grant, finish that paper or work on your current research?

The short answer that emerged from our discussion was that the first priority should be to develop a long-term plan of one's goals and then evaluate different possibilities against their long-term benefit to "The Plan". A major ingredient in The Plan should be to ensure one's long term interests and motivations are consistently reinforced.

The recommendations emerging from the discussion can roughly be divided along three time scales: years, months and days. Hopefully, sharing these thoughts can be useful as a stimulus to determine best practices on the way to a productive, fulfilling

and balanced work and personal life. These thoughts are just that, of course, and are not even intended as a game plan or suggestion to follow. There are many specific recommendations that probably apply to few and certainly do not apply in the absolute. Many successful scientists have shown great variations in their approach to becoming outstanding, productive academicians, so nothing should be taken as an absolute, even if it reads that way.

The Long-term Plan - measured on the order of years

Many group members found it useful to have a long-term plan, particularly if they then use that plan to ensure any time invested promotes their long-term goals. Some organisations formalise this process and require an annual performance agreement between supervisors and staff; such an agreement can be a good mechanism for managing workload. In her talk at the 2006 Ocean Sciences meeting in Hawaii, Margaret Leinen¹ recommended a formalized agreement between post-docs and their advisors that explicitly outlines a timeline of responsibilities and expectations. This agreement is then regularly revisited to help all involved meet their goals. Lacking a structured environment, individuals could establish such an agreement with themselves.

The development of a long-term plan can be aided by the regular review of one's vita and comparison with long-term goals. It's useful to maintain several CVs of different length and level of detail. The longest one should document everything – all grants applied for, whether successful or not, all publications submitted, every seminar given. This CV is for annual and tenure reviews. The shortest CV contains only the successes. In addition, one should collect everything for the tenure review, including that letter thanking one for one's attendance at a science fair, etc. See Graham (2003) for more about tenure.

For many attendants, a tenure-track academic position was at least one of the preferred long-term goals. Such tenure-track positions are in short supply and highly competitive. To some, a postdoctoral position was a compromise, allowing them to remain in the holding pattern. Others maintained they learned a lot from having many post-doc positions and it prepared them well for their first tenure-track position. Others enjoy post-doc positions as it's less of a commitment than a faculty position. It was concluded that post-doc'ing is only a trap if you feel you want to get out and can't. The sentiment that the post-doc time is the best time of one's scientific life (most freedom) was shared by those in tenure-track positions. Those still uncertain about their professional future were less enthusiastic about the post-doc time.

Senior faculty describe the greatest challenge as finding time to 'fill one's cup'. They see more and more time spent on administrative and business matters, which are important but not necessarily fulfilling. A big danger lies in the fact that "paper pushing" can be a bottomless time sink and needs to be actively managed so that it does not drain all of the time. To remain happy, productive and engaged, making time to do the science we enjoy was seen to be essential. Such activities vary between researchers; going to sea is a popular option for oceanographers, but even land-bound

¹ NSF: Addressing the Challenges of Graduate and Post-graduate Training in the Geosciences

researchers need extended periods for science-intense field, lab or discussion time with collaborators such as those on shipboard enjoy.

Current projects - measured on the order of months Publications, proposals, conferences

Scientists are always judging or being judged (Alldrege, 1999), so one needs to develop considerable toughness in a competitive environment. Enjoyment of the work done should be an underlying theme and guide in balancing projects and deciding between opportunities. The senior faculty present commented that they wished they'd more fully enjoyed the opportunities they had, particularly when they were Post-docs.

Reviewing is a time-consuming and important service to the scientific community. It's not unusual to complete 10 reviews a year, and it's all too easy to put your heart and soul into each review. It is important to do a good job, but also important not to spend too much time and do work that should have been done by the authors or will be done by the type-setting editor. Avoid making editorial changes and suggestions, and comment on the quality and importance of the science only. Don't be tempted to do the editor's job. If it is so poorly written and structured that you can't get to the science, send it back. Look out for volunteer organisations that offer an editing service for scientific writing. Resubmission of rejected but largely unaltered manuscripts was a frustration (and time sink) for several reviewers. This problem has been recognized (see Riisgard et al., 2003) but can only be solved by a change in the assessment of the quality and quantity of publications and ultimately by a change in scientists' behavior.

A major question during our discussion was how to balance between creating new opportunities (i.e. writing proposals) and finishing up work (i.e. presenting and publishing work). The recommendation was to do both in a cyclical manner. Proposals beget papers beget proposals. Recognizing that funding and publishing is a cycle, it is best to ensure ones pipeline of work reflects this by always having a couple of papers in the works. Moreover, it seemed to be a bad idea to leave work unpublished for more than a year. Aim for 2-3 papers per year, with at least one of those as first author. Many attendants identify co-authors who are students on their publication list, as this demonstrates the ability to advise students and lead them through successful research projects.

Besides publishing, it is also important to attend conferences and workshops, to be seen and find out the latest and greatest. Meetings, however, are also a major time sink as they are generally several days long and require almost exclusive attention. A high degree of selectiveness with meetings was advised with attendance limited to just one or two. There are benefits to big meetings that have specialised sessions, but smaller meetings were a favourite in the discussion. There are benefits to talks and posters; talks give better exposure, but posters are better for one-on-one engagement. Reflect on what you'd like from the meeting and decide accordingly. It was suggested that Post-Doc's and early faculty favour giving talks, for the better exposure and later move to the background allowing their students to gather attention. The time required to prepare for a meeting was suggested as a useful time to collect thoughts and evaluate the long-term plan, akin to a scientists new years resolution.

Meeting attendance and teaching commitments often clash. Teaching commitments can reduce flexibility. However, many departments will appreciate faculty's active engagement in research science and might be supportive of their meeting attendance. More broadly, one's careers will always have an undercurrent of tension between the need to be flexible and adaptable, and the need to stick to a long-term plan and the need to focus on the tasks at hand. All we can do is be aware of these conflicting pressures and strike the best balance we can.

Tricks of the trade or day-to-day time savers

Lack of time is a universal problem to professionals, thus there are many strategies and time savers available, including workshops! Particularly in the consulting and legal services, worker's time is measured in 15-minute increments, thus time is truly of the essence. In light of the many demands on ones time and the many 'useful' inventions to save time, it is not surprising that a considerable array of tricks of the trade exists. Here is a collection of specific odds and ends that were suggested. This section is far from exhaustive and many additional references are available.

A structured and scheduled approach is fundamental to time management. To generate working or thinking time, many make appointments with themselves. Just as the weekly meeting with the lab group or students is high on the priority list, one can schedule reading, writing or talking (consider closing your door) time with oneself. It then takes discipline to accomplish the scheduled rather than a currently pressing task. Some turn off their email during these times or even activate automatic 'out of the office' reply features.

The discussion group was split into passionate list keepers and non-list keepers. For the former, to-do lists can become more effective when they are nested and have different levels of detail (e.g. daily and weekly). It's particularly useful to include things that can be done in varying amounts of time. Some treat their to-do lists as a contract that specifies the tasks for a particular hour or day. Other items, that may require attention, are placed on the to-do list, rather than doing them right away. Longer-term projects can be organized by maintaining and amending a physical or electronic collection of photos, data, method descriptions through the project's lifespan. This collection then forms the core for compiling the material for a future talk and publication and organises the work and thoughts.

Delegation was an important skill to acquire. With any position, determine what administrative help, if any, is available and use that help effectively. Treating co-workers well, with a spirit of generosity and respect, was seen to be an important part of effective delegation.

A deliberate, thoughtful and structured approach that is guided by long-term plans and goals appears to be a potential means to balance the many opportunities that await you in your academic life and career. Look for projects that are enjoyable and utilize your potential. . Look for projects that are enjoyable and utilize your potential. Then, balancing priorities can be rephrased as 'choosing opportunities'.

Acknowledgements: This essay is largely based on notes taken during the discussion held at the DIALOG VII symposium. Thus we thank all seventeen discussion participants for their contribution. Our discussion group was guided by DIALOG VII Symposium Mentor Dr. Tammi Richardson and symposium co-organizer Dr. Monty Graham, who generously shared their experiences and provided the ‘senior’ perspective. Their contribution is gratefully acknowledged. Jennifer Clough’s revisions are much appreciated. We especially want to thank Dr. Sue Weiler for organizing an immensely successful and helpful symposium that provided much-needed development of professional and scientific skills, and for help developing our notes into this paper.

The DIALOG VII symposium was supported by U.S. National Science Foundation grant OCE-0217056; Office of Naval Research and National Aeronautics and Space Administration grant #N00014-98-1-05; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant #NA16OP1435. Grants are to Whitman College, C.S. Weiler PI. These agencies support the program and most participant travel. The American Society of Limnology and Oceanography, Education Section of the American Fisheries Society and Society of Canadian Limnologists each provided \$2,000 in travel awards. SMD is funded through a fellowship from the German National Science Foundation, DFG.

References

Allredge, Alice. 1999. Perspectives from mid career: Oceanography as path and passion. *ASLO Bulletin* 8(1):26 - 31

Graham, W.M. 2003. Navigating promotion and tenure: Strategies for the newly employed. *L&O Bulletin* 12(4): 85-86. <http://aslo.org/phd/tenuretips.pdf>

Riisgård. H.U. 2003. Misuse of the peer-review system: time for countermeasures? *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 258:297-309