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WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Cura Personalis and the Challenge of Work-Life Balance

By Diane Dreher

For many faculty members today, no matter how hard we work, there's always something more to do. As we attempt to balance our personal and professional lives, handling our teaching, scholarship, and service along with new expectations for assessment, program review, and 24/7 e-mail availability, something has had to give. Too often it is *cura personalis*, care of the whole person—our students, our colleagues, our families, and ourselves. To handle the avalanche of daily demands, many of us answer e-mail after midnight and spend our weekends trying to catch up.

The problem goes beyond the academic world. Americans are working more hours now than ever before. In 2006, the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington reported that Americans work 193 more hours per year than the British, 376 more than the Germans and 388 more than the French. Now as American corporations continue to downsize, we're witnessing an unhealthy combination of high unemployment for many and higher workloads for others, accompanied by increased burnout, stress-related illnesses, and depression.

Eating lunch at our desks while answering email.

In a culture of dehumanizing capitalism and what Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás has called the "globalization of superficiality," Jesuit universities have a new challenge: to be beacons of light, affirming human dignity and discernment to heal our troubled world

("Networking Jesuit Higher Education," Mexico City, April 23, 2010). Our universities have a long tradition of *cura personalis*, offering a compassionate alternative to the status quo. In the 1970s, Santa Clara University president, William Rewak, S.J.,'s annual address reminded our faculty that the work we do makes a powerful difference in the lives around us, and by extension, to the world. Back then, faculty members had long conversations with students about classes, current events, and the directions of their lives, and we enjoyed lively discussions with colleagues over lunch at the faculty club. But now we often find ourselves so busy that we eat lunch at our desks while answering e-mail.

In the lives of college faculty, these changes add up, for how we spend our time expresses our values. Ideally, universities can light the way to shared exploration and discovery, encourage intellectual playfulness, camaraderie, and living our vocations — the reasons we went into higher education in the first place. But universities also have their shadow side, when the light of meaning and purpose is buried under administrivia, our vocations reduced to endless to-do lists, denying us quality time for teaching and research, let alone the joy of discovery or that one conversation that can change a student's life.

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The myth of multitasking

Too many of us spend our days multitasking, slyly checking e-mail while in meetings, on the phone, in class, or trying to spend time with friends and families. But we cannot really multitask. Research has shown that our brains merely shift from one task to another, losing concentration, effectiveness, and perhaps even neural connections along the way. The chronic stress of trying to do too much in too little time sacrifices the quality of our personal interactions and shrinks the hippocampus, a vital part of the brain involved in memory. Many faculty are chronically sleep-deprived, struggling through our days like battle-weary veterans. One morning I complained to a colleague that to finish grading midterms, I'd gotten only five hours of sleep the night before. "I got four," she told me. Walking by, another colleague upped the ante—"I didn't get any sleep at all." Studies have related sleep deprivation to memory loss, mood swings, blurred vision, poor judgment, impaired coordination, a weakened immune system, and increased risk for serious diseases and accidents, noting that driving while sleep deprived is worse than driving while intoxicated.

As our work has increased in quantity, its quality—and the quality of our lives—has diminished, standing in stark contrast to *cura personalis*, the care of the whole person, the hallmark of Jesuit education. Instead of taking time for discernment, we often grasp impatiently at short-term solutions. Our health suffers—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. We need personal self-care to protect us from burnout and institutional policies to support us as whole persons. The challenge to Jesuit higher education today is to seek the *magis*, to take the lead in creating a more compassionate, balanced counterculture of *cura personalis* for ourselves and our communities.

Santa Clara's response to the challenge

In 2008, Santa Clara University received an award from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and American Council on Education to strengthen our support for work-life balance. The personal investigator for the grant, our vice provost for academic affairs, set up a faculty work-life advisory committee, created my position of work-life balance consultant, and initiated a series of innovative campus programs. By surveying the faculty, we found that we needed not only to expand our existing resources but also to communi-



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cate more effectively about the resources we had. Santa Clara has had an on-site child care center, Kids on Campus, since the early 1970s but it has not grown to meet the needs of our increasing faculty and staff. We have a generous family leave policy and employee assistance program with free legal, financial, and psychological counseling, but many faculty members were struggling with their problems alone, unaware of these resources.

In 2009-2010, the first full year of our grant, our university added a new faculty resources website, and our faculty development director prepared a new brochure for administrators, *Career Flexibility and Work-Life Balance for SCU Faculty: A Toolkit for Chairs and Deans* (<http://www.scu.edu/provost/facultydevelopment/prof-dev/dept-chair-resources/upload/SCU-Toolkit-01-06-11.PDF>). In 2011, our faculty development director initiated an annual



Campus speakers, workshops, and support programs

During the first year of our grant, we invited distinguished speakers to campus to deepen our awareness of work-life issues and best practices. Joan Williams, distinguished professor of law at University of California Hastings College of Law; Mary Ann Mason, professor and co-director of the center for economics and family security at the University of California Berkeley School of Law; and Laraine Zappert, clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Stanford University school of medicine shared their research and strategies. During the last two academic years, we have held six workshops for faculty and staff on issues from personal balance—mindfulness and life management—to career flexibility, child care, elder care, and retirement. Our workshops were well attended, with record numbers at our elder care workshop, demonstrating serious unmet needs in this area as midlife faculty and staff struggle to balance their work, family and community lives while handling crises from aging parents, often hundreds of miles away.

faculty resource fair and our interim provost distributed a brochure for faculty, *Promoting Work-Life Balance and Career Flexibility: A Faculty Resource Guide*. (http://www.scu.edu/provost/facultydevelopment/work-life/w-l-research/upload/Faculty_Work_Life_Resource_Guide.pdf). We have reached out to campus leaders with annual work-life balance workshops for deans, associate deans, and department chairs. The faculty development director gives them the *Toolkit*, explains our current work-life resources, goes over hypothetical cases, and reinforces their responsibility to support work-life balance for faculty and staff.

Our efforts are making a difference. Follow-up surveys have shown a significant increase in both faculty awareness of work-life support policies and their belief that administrators support their needs with greater understanding and flexibility.

Personal support, community, and creative growth

By developing a network of personal support, we have strengthened our culture of *cura personalis*. Our vice provost, later interim provost, and the assistant vice provost for academic affairs have actively promoted work-life balance. The chair of our work-life advisory committee has led with passionate commitment, and committee members have met regularly to plan programs, address current problems, draft policy statements, and advocate for constructive change. Our two recent faculty development directors have served *ex officio* on the work-life committee and incorporated work-life balance into many of their programs. As work-life balance consultant, I have met with individual faculty

members to offer information, advice, and referrals, often to our work-life balance coach. A vital source of support, our coach is a licensed psychotherapist in the community, available to meet with faculty members confidentially for three sessions to help them set priorities, manage time, deal with stress, and develop a program of self-care. If faculty need more extensive counseling, the coach helps them locate a therapist through our employee assistance program. Since 2009, 52 faculty members have benefited from work-life coaching.

As work-life balance consultant, I facilitate monthly work-life affinity groups in which faculty members meet over lunch to share concerns about personal balance, child care, elder care, and other work-life challenges. Small groups of faculty discuss personal issues, offer support, and share strategies while learning about campus resources. These sessions have revealed new solutions and helped shape university policy. When one faculty member told how she had tried to finish a conference paper in her office one Saturday while her toddler played on the floor, she found that across campus a colleague had been doing the same thing. Faculty members began building community, exchanging contact information, offering to share child care. Some faculty members with young children told of mornings they were scheduled to teach but found a child sick, not seriously ill, but too sick to go to school or child care. They needed emergency on-call child care, but didn't know where to find it. Other faculty members told of panic calls when an aging parent needed help and lived on the other side of the country. When I passed these needs on to our interim provost, he responded by signing the university up with Care.Com, an on-line service that provides referrals for child care, including urgent on-call care, a consultation with a geriatric care manager, and a nationwide network of elder caregivers.

The work-life affinity groups have produced what Fr. Nicolás has called “real creativity. . . an active, dynamic process of finding responses to real questions,” providing not only support and information for faculty but also initiating a productive conversation between faculty and administrators, helping to build our culture of *cura personalis* as we cultivate community, making time to listen, explore, and create new possibilities together.

The examen and ongoing discernment

As Fr. Nicolás has reminded us, Jesuit universities are instruments of progress “for individuals as well as for society.” In terms of work-life balance, we can fulfill this responsibility by exercising ongoing discernment and adopting the Ignatian *examen* for ourselves and our institutions.

As a recent example, last year when our work-life faculty advisory committee became concerned about escalating demands on faculty time, they prepared a proposal for our faculty senate and university coordinating committee, asking that “All proposals for projects, programs, policies, procedures, and other initiatives that affect faculty workload should provide realistic estimates of anticipated faculty

commitments of time and effort” and that “best practice suggests that these costs should be made explicit and taken into account in decision making,

and that initiatives that impose new burdens on faculty should justify these burdens in terms of the benefits to the institution,” balancing faculty members’ work commitments accordingly.

Institutionally, our universities—at the department, program, and administrative levels—can conduct an ongoing *examen* of their policies: asking how well they support the Ignatian *cura personalis* while listening for unmet needs that signal directions for future growth. Individually, as faculty and administrators, we can cultivate greater balance for ourselves by making a daily *examen*, pausing for a few moments at the end of each day to review our activities, asking how well they express our deepest values.

Jesuit universities have traditionally combined *cura personalis* with wisdom, creativity, and innovation to educate new generations of leaders. One powerful form of education, according to psychologist Albert Bandura, is social modeling. If, in our institutions and individual lives, we can model for our students greater balance, joy and meaning, then we can affirm the *magis*, fulfilling our mission of education by lighting the way to reveal new possibilities in the complex challenges of our times. ■

They needed emergency child care, but didn't know where to find it.