Returning to Graduate School

How to Balance School, Work and Family

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Submit grant application. Follow up on fellowship. Take kids to soccer game. Meet mentor for coffee. Stay late at lab to finish report. Attend partner’s company party. Register for next quarter. Complete final group project. Clean house before aunt arrives for the week. Finish financial statement for boss at work. Make lasagna for graduate student potluck. Give prospective grad students campus tour, at request of department chair.

A graduate student’s to-do list can look like tasks for four separate people. In fact, as a graduate student, in order to get everything done, you may wish you could clone yourself into four people: graduate student, working professional, lab (or teaching) assistant, and partner and/or parent.

Balancing graduate school with family life and a professional career isn’t easy, nor is it uncomplicated. But by setting regular goals and boundaries, you can do this.

On the Homefront

• Make sure the return to school is supported by your partner (spouse) and family because you will need their support and flexibility.
• If you have children, know what school events or obligations you will and will not be able to attend.
• Explain to your extended family that your plate is full and you may not be able to host visitors at certain times, or return calls or emails as quickly as usual.
• Be sure to build into your schedule some family time.

Balancing Work and School

• Be as organized as possible.
• Know due dates for your school assignments and work deadlines.
• Address conflicts right away.
• Be proactive about your school requirements.
• Meet with your professors during office hours when possible.
• Be clear about expectations and work schedules with your employer.
• Explore whether your employer is able to or interested in contributing to the cost of your education. This can make the fact that you are a student an investment your employer supports on multiple levels.
• Find ways to engage your employer in what you are learning. Share your thinking and show how it connects to your job. Show your employer why your being a student makes you a better employee.

Combine Your Efforts
• Watch for opportunities to have some aspect of your work to double as a school assignment — this is especially possible with people who are returning to graduate school to advance in their current careers.
• Find other, like-situated students or co-workers who are also balancing work and school. You may learn important strategies from them, too.

Compartmentalize
• If there is not an obvious mix between your school work and job, be clear about your time commitments to each.
• Try not to think about work — checking email, for example — when you are involved in your course work.

Most importantly, be strategic and purposeful about your time. You will be busy, but remind yourself that this is temporary and the pay-off will be big in the form of an increased salary, job promotion, security or advancement, or simply your intellectual and personal development.