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Work-Life Balance Satisfaction: An Analysis of Gender Differences and Contributing Factors

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This descriptive study examined the differences in men and women student affairs professional's perceived satisfaction with work-life balance and current job, as well as the factors that contribute to satisfaction in both areas. While both were generally more satisfied than less satisfied, women generally indicated lower levels of satisfaction overall with both work-life balance and their current job, the difference between women and men was not statistically significant. Multiple personal and professional factors positively correlated with work-life balance satisfaction, and women and men identified similar factors that contribute to their current satisfaction.

Keywords: student affairs, work-life balance, gender, satisfaction

The term “glass ceiling” was coined in the 1980’s to explain why women were not surpassing an invisible barrier and reaching top jobs. Today many more women are entering student affairs (Engstrom, McIntosh, & Ridzi, 2006), a disparity exists in the number of women who advance to and occupy higher paying and senior level administrative positions (Engstrom et al., 2006). While the topic of work-life balance has been studied widely in various professional sectors, and even to some degree with faculty (Lindquist, Misra & O’Meara, 2012; Quinn & Litzler, 2009), little research exists focusing directly on student affairs (Beeny, Guthrie, Rhodes, & Terrell, 2005).

Positive work-life balance is commonly depicted among professionals as involving achievement, enjoyment, and satisfaction with the amount and quality of time spent on each commitment; living in congruence with personal values (Beeny et al., 2005; Jyothi & Jyothi, 2012). This opposes the notion that achieving balance requires devoting equal amounts of time and energy to each commitment, though much discussion around the topic often depicts it as an either/or situation (Beeny et al., 2005). Advancing technology has enabled people to communicate 24 hours a day from virtually anywhere in the world. As a result, the boundary between work and family time is blurred, increasing the likelihood of “work-family spillover” (Ilies, Wilson, & Wagner, 2009, p. 87). Kuther (2003) ascertained that when a person does not feel satisfied with their work-life balance, diminished effectiveness and personal detriment can occur, in one if not all three areas of focus: career, family, and personal interest.

Previous research has suggested a high rate of dissatisfaction and turnover among student affairs professionals (Strayhorn, 2009). Grube, Cedarholm, Jones, and Dunn (2005) examined graduate students and young professionals and found that making personal sacrifices for career achievement may lead to professional burnout, subsequently contributing to the poor retention rates among entry-level professionals. Work-life balance is important as it may impact whether individuals pursue careers in higher education and ultimately their career advancement in the field. The goal of this study is to explore student affairs professional’s level of satisfaction with work-life balance and current job status, as well as the factors that contribute to satisfaction levels.

Literature Review

Work-life Balance Satisfaction for Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals have traditionally struggled with how to attain proper work-life balance (Bolton, 2005; Grube et al., 2005; Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012; Lancaster, 2005; Turrentine, 2005). Bolton (2005) explained that long hours and non-traditional schedules make it particularly difficult for some to reach a satisfying personal and professional balance. In many student affairs organizations, the work culture demands long hours of hard work for levels of compensation that are not competitive with the private sector (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). However despite past research, if working in student affairs was not satisfying and rewarding in some way, then fewer professionals would pursue a career and persist in the field.

Not every position in the field has unreasonable hours or work-load demands, and such challenges may be more prevalent for lower-level professionals and graduate students, who are often first sought for evening and weekend engagements, and to live on the job (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Significant differences in expectations may also exist depending on institutional type (Hirt, 2006), mission, vision, and core values.

When turnover rates for student affairs professionals were examined, results concluded that interactions with peers and supervisors influenced young professionals' socialization into the field, and therefore may influence persistence (Strayhorn, 2009). For more seasoned professionals, perceptions about the quality of work-life mattered most to mid-level professional's satisfaction, but it was the combination of demographic characteristics, work-life satisfaction, and morale that contributed most to their persistence. Findings also suggested that mid-level leaders may expect deficiencies, such as lower pay, limited advancement opportunities, and poor work-life balance, and are thus more motivated by intrinsic rewards (Rosser, 2004).

Gender and Work-life Issues

Ultimately, many shared conceptions pertaining to work-life balance exist between genders (Beeny et al., 2005). However, past research indicates women are less satisfied with their positions and the student affairs profession in general, and tend to leave at higher rates than men (Blackhurst, 2000). Women also reported feeling less balanced in their professional and personal lives than their male counterparts and perceived higher expectations from others both at

work and at home, ultimately contributing to women's perceived lack of control over the amount of balance or imbalance in their lives (Beeny et al., 2005).

Women with children working in student affairs may face additional challenges in the workplace due to their child-care commitments (Mason, 2009). Networking events (conferences, workshops, receptions) are often encouraged, if not required, as they are looked favorably upon and may present advancement opportunity, but typically occur outside of regular work hours. Women were found to more likely reformulate career goals and slow their ascent to higher positions once they had children (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Nobbe and Manning (1997) supported such points by studying a sample of 35 mothers (with various aged children) working in different areas of student affairs who had achieved at least a rank of director or above, and examined their methods of balancing the responsibilities of work and family. The majority of women reported their career goals changed and they made sacrifices once they had children. They also reported feeling they had to prove their productivity and performance would not suffer after having children (Nobbe & Manning, 1997).

Although work-life balance has traditionally been studied in relation to women, there has been a shift in these dynamics (Evans, Carney, & Wilkinson, 2013), with the rise of dual-career families which require shifts in parental, household, and partnership responsibilities (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lyons, 2010). For many men, the desire to find balance and become more engaged in personal life commitments has increased and become of greater importance (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011; Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009; Evans et al., 2013; Hayman & Rasmussen, 2013). According to McClellan (2005), until recently, work-life balance was only a conversation among women. Unfortunately for men, professional expectations and societal pressures centered on professional and financial demands created stressful conflict with personal values and responsibilities (Aumann et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2013). Not surprising, research suggests that a positive, family-friendly, supportive organizational culture is associated with higher work performance and satisfaction among both men and women (Turrentine, 2005).

In employment environments that men perceived to be supportive of work-life balance, they reported more satisfaction and personal well-being in all areas of life (Burke, 2010). While some colleges and universities now offer gender-neutral parental leave policies, past research suggested men are less likely to utilize the benefits; this may be in part attributed to bias avoidance, fear of discrimination, or jeopardizing their career (Lindquist et al., 2012). It was

also found that a main determinant in whether men utilize leave benefits relied on their partner's preference and ability to be the primary caregiver due to their own employment (Lindquist et al., 2012).

Purpose of Study

This study seeks to further examine the differences in men's and women's level of satisfaction with both work-life balance and their current job within the field of student affairs. In addition, this study examines factors associated with greater work-life balance and job satisfaction for men and women in student affairs.

Method

This descriptive and quantitative study examines the perceptions of work-life balance and job satisfaction among men and women working in student affairs and the associated contributing factors. Sampling for this study involved solicitation of student affairs professionals from eight different regional professional associations, with either a generalist or specialist focus (i.e. state division of ACPA or regional career development association). All eight associations agreed to send a solicitation to participate email to their members through their respective association listserv. One hundred eighty eight student affairs professionals who worked at a variety of institutions throughout the northeast participated. Of the total sample, 72% identified as female and 28% identified as male. Two participants preferred not to identify their gender and were therefore not included in the overall data analysis as it specifically focused on a comparison of gender, resulting in a total sample population of 186. Racial diversity was limited for this sample with 88.1% of participants identifying as Caucasian/White. Additional descriptive statistics are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for sample population (N=186)

Variable		Frequency <i>n</i>	Percent of Sample
Gender	Male	52	28.0
	Female	134	72.0
	Transgender	0	0.0
Age	21-30 years old	51	27.4
	31-40 years old	58	31.2
	41-50 years old	39	21.0
	51-60 years old	25	13.4
	61+ years old	12	6.5

	Prefer not to identify	1	0.5
Years working in higher education	1-5 years	45	24.2
	6-10 years	44	23.7
	11-15 years	43	23.1
	16-20 years	22	11.8
	21+ years	32	17.2
Race	African American	5	2.6
	Caucasian/White	171	88.1
	Latino(a)/Hispanic/Chicano(a)	7	3.6
	Multiracial	4	2.1
	Other	2	1.0
Current position level	Graduate student	3	2.1
	Entry-level	36	18.6
	Mid-level	99	53.0
	Senior level	36	19.6
	CSAO/VP	2	1.0
	Faculty	10	5.7

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The questions in this study surrounded work-life balance and job satisfaction among men and women working in student affairs. The survey instrument reflected broader questions through the inquiry and examination of several variables, including factors that may contribute to work-life balance and job satisfaction, personal and professional sacrifices, and general demographic variables.

Primary analysis involved the comparison of mean responses for current levels of work-life balance and job satisfaction among student affairs professionals based on gender using a one-way ANOVA. Further examination involved exploring the relationship between specific variables and levels of satisfaction with work-life balance using correlational analysis. A final analysis compared the perceptions of men and women with respect to barriers for advancement in the field, comparing mean responses.

Results

The initial analysis examined the self-reported current levels of satisfaction with both participant's work-life balance and current job based on gender. Satisfaction levels were reported with a Likert rating scale from very satisfied (5) to very dissatisfied (1) and mean responses were compared. The results (Table 2) do not suggest a statistically significant difference between men and women's satisfaction with their current work life balance or

satisfaction with their current job. While women generally appeared less satisfied in both measures (work-life $M=3.44$, job satisfaction $M=3.77$) than men (work-life $M=3.50$, job satisfaction $M=4.04$), the results are inconclusive and appear to challenge notions of work-life balance as a gendered concept of which only women appear to be dissatisfied. Both men and women appear to be more satisfied than less satisfied.

Table 2

Comparison of Mean Satisfaction with Work-life Balance and Job Based on Gender

		Frequency <i>n</i>	Mean (<i>M</i>)	Standard Deviation (<i>SD</i>)
Work-life balance	Men	52	3.50	1.111
	Women	133	3.44	1.061
Current job	Men	52	4.04	1.047
	Women	133	3.77	.942

Further examination involved the comparison of men and women’s mean level of satisfaction with work-life balance and job based on the number of years in higher education, participant’s age, and current position (Table 3). Again, while no statistical difference was found between men and women’s satisfaction levels based on any of the three variables, the results suggest interesting patterns. With respect to years in the field, women continue to be generally

Table 3

Comparison of Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance and Job by Gender and Years Working in Higher Education

Years in Higher Ed		Work-Life Balance		Job Satisfaction	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
1-5 years	<i>M</i>	3.15	3.56	3.92	3.81
	<i>SD</i>	1.345	.948	.862	.965
6-10 years	<i>M</i>	3.44	3.26	4.11	3.69
	<i>SD</i>	1.014	1.039	1.269	.796
11-15 years	<i>M</i>	3.60	3.33	3.80	3.56
	<i>SD</i>	1.174	1.137	1.317	1.003
16-20 years	<i>M</i>	4.17	3.20	3.83	3.73
	<i>SD</i>	.753	1.146	1.169	1.100
21+ years	<i>M</i>	3.50	3.94	4.36	4.33
	<i>SD</i>	1.019	.998	.842	.767

less satisfied than men with their job over the course of their career. However, when looking at satisfaction with work-life balance, women ($M=3.56$) within the first five years of their career

appeared to be more satisfied than men ($M=3.15$), and women ($M=3.94$) were also more satisfied with work-life balance than men ($M=3.50$) if they had worked more than 21 years in the field. These results suggest perception changes for women over the course of their career.

Examining the differences in satisfaction with work-life balance based on position level resulted in no statistically significant difference (Table 4). Comparison of professionals at the graduate student level, chief student affairs officer/vice president level, and faculty in student affairs preparation programs were inconclusive due to the small sample size. However, an overall examination of work-life balance demonstrates men are less satisfied than women with work-life balance in the earlier stages of their career. Men in mid-level ($M= 3.62$) and senior level ($M=3.92$) positions demonstrated higher satisfaction with work-life balance than female colleagues ($M=3.48, M=3.22$ respectively). While inconclusive, the shift in perceptions based on length of career and position level warrants further consideration and exploration.

Table 4

Comparison of Variance in Levels of Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance and Job by Gender and Position Level

Position Level		Work-Life Balance		Job Satisfaction	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
Graduate Student	<i>M</i>	1.00	2.50	4.00	2.00
	<i>SD</i>	-	.707	-	1.414
Entry-level	<i>M</i>	3.00	3.59	3.78	3.81
	<i>SD</i>	1.225	1.010	.972	.786
Mid-level	<i>M</i>	3.62	3.48	3.73	3.75
	<i>SD</i>	1.061	1.002	1.185	.863
Senior level	<i>M</i>	3.92	3.22	4.75	3.83
	<i>SD</i>	.793	1.242	.452	1.072
CSAO/VP	<i>M</i>	2.50	3.00	4.50	5.00
	<i>SD</i>	.707	-	.707	-
Faculty	<i>M</i>	3.67	3.43	4.67	4.00
	<i>SD</i>	1.155	1.397	.577	1.414

A comparison of overall satisfaction with work-life balance and job based on age and gender produced no significant differences. However, men who were 21-30 years old ($M= 3.20$) and 51-60 years old ($M=3.60$) had slightly lower levels of satisfaction with work-life balance than their female peers ($M=3.31, M=3.90$ respectively). This indicates there may be gender differences across the life-span with respect to work-life balance satisfaction. This supports earlier findings based on years in the field, which showed higher satisfaction for women with

fewer years in the field or 21 or more years in the field. Overall, men again had generally higher mean levels of satisfaction with their job regardless of age (Table 5).

Table 5

Comparison of Levels of Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance and Job by Gender and Age

Age		Work-Life Balance		Job Satisfaction	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
21-30 years	<i>M</i>	3.20	3.31	3.93	3.67
	<i>SD</i>	1.265	1.064	.799	1.042
31-40 years	<i>M</i>	3.43	3.26	3.79	3.81
	<i>SD</i>	1.158	1.026	1.424	.732
41-50 years	<i>M</i>	3.73	3.54	4.00	3.68
	<i>SD</i>	1.104	1.170	.894	1.219
51-60 years	<i>M</i>	3.60	3.90	4.00	3.95
	<i>SD</i>	.548	.968	1.225	.826
61+ years	<i>M</i>	3.86	3.40	4.86	4.00
	<i>SD</i>	1.069	.894	.378	.707

A second analysis examined several personal and professional factors and their contribution to satisfaction with work-life balance (Table 6). Participants who indicated “very satisfied,” “satisfied,” or “neutral” ($n=140$) with respect to their current level of satisfaction with work-life balance were asked to indicate which factors impacted their current state. Participants who indicated “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” ($n=45$) with their current work-life balance were asked to indicate which factors might contribute to a greater sense of satisfaction (Table 6). Both men and women identified supportive supervisor (Men=47.1%, Women= 20.7%) and supportive family/partner (Men=50.0%, Women=20.7) as the top two factors contributing to current satisfaction, indicating that men and women have similar views on what enhances work-life balance satisfaction. Women identified flexibility of work hours (35.0%) and men identified supportive colleagues and peers (19.3%) as the third top contributing factor. The most frequent response to what would contribute to greater satisfaction for both men and women who indicated they were less satisfied with their current work-life balance ($n=45$) was a more reasonable work load or reduced responsibilities (M=24.4%, W=57.8%). Women also frequently indicated flexibility of hours (28.9%) and men frequently indicated a supportive supervisor (17.8%).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Factors that Contribute to Satisfaction with Work-life Balance by Gender (n=140, n=45)

Factors	Contribute to current satisfaction (n=140)		Contribute to greater satisfaction (n=45)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Flexibility of work hours	19 (13.6)	49 (35.0)	6 (13.3)	13 (28.9)
Standard 9 to 5 hours	19 (13.6)	27 (19.3)	2 (4.4)	9 (20.0)
Supportive supervisor	29 (20.7)	66 (47.1)	8 (17.8)	11 (24.4)
Mentor/Role Model	7 (5.0)	23 (16.4)	6 (13.3)	11 (24.4)
Supportive family/partner	29 (20.7)	70 (50.0)	2 (4.4)	3 (6.7)
Supportive colleagues/peers	27 (19.3)	70 (50.0)	4 (8.9)	9 (20.0)
Professional development opportunities	20 (14.3)	48 (34.3)	5 (11.1)	11 (24.4)
Supportive institutional policies	11 (7.9)	20 (14.3)	6 (13.3)	11 (24.4)
Reasonable workload/responsibilities	13 (9.3)	36 (25.7)	11 (24.4)	26 (57.8)

A final analysis examined the relationship between satisfaction with work-life balance, job satisfaction, and personal and professional factors. The results of a simple bivariate correlation are presented in Table 7. Both work-life balance and job satisfaction are positively and significantly correlated ($r=.26, p<.01$) indicating as satisfaction increases in one area, so too does satisfaction in the other area. All but one of the professional and personal factors examined in this study were positively correlated with work-life balance at the $p<.01$ level. Standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours were positively correlated with work-life balance, but not as significantly ($r=.33, p<.05$). Flexibility of hours, supportive supervisor, supportive colleagues/peers, professional development, and supportive institutional policies were positively correlated with job satisfaction. Non-significant factors in relation to job satisfaction were having standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours, a mentor/role model, supportive family/partner, and a reasonable or reduced workload.

Table 7

Correlations for all Factors, Work-Life Balance, and Job Satisfaction

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Work-life balance	1										
Job satisfaction	.26**	1									
Flexibility of hours	.41**	.26**	1								
Standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours	.33*	-.05	-.10	1							
Supportive supervisor	.52**	.39**	.50**	.04	1						
Mentor/role model	.21**	.11	.24**	-.01	.26**	1					
Supportive family/partner	.51**	.12	.24**	.19*	.42**	.15*	1				
Supportive colleagues/peers	.48**	.25**	.21**	.18*	.48**	.24**	.46**	1			
Professional development opportunities	.39**	.28**	.44**	.11	.41**	.49**	.29**	.39**	1		
Supportive institutional policies	.35**	.22**	.32**	.11	.32**	.12	.13	.20**	.26**	1	
Reasonable or reduced workload	.44**	.13	.30**	.20**	.32**	.18*	.27**	.21**	.27**	.33**	1

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The results of this study present new knowledge about work-life balance and satisfaction with the field of student affairs. Specifically, this study addressed a gap in research that has not fully explored the differences in men and women’s satisfaction with work-life balance, job satisfaction, and the factors associated with both. The lack of statistically significant difference in satisfaction levels between men and women is in some ways significant itself. The results challenge previous research and assumptions, which assert women are less satisfied than men with work-life balance and ultimately with their job. The results suggest that men’s satisfaction with work-life balance is equally worthy of consideration.

Results further suggest women in the earlier and much later stages of their career may in fact be more satisfied with work-life balance than their male counterparts at similar stages. This supports previous research focused on women in mid-career or director level who noted they made significant professional sacrifices when they decided to start a family (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). This observable pattern provides insight into the attrition of women at mid-career and lends further support to the examination of what factors contribute to greater work-life satisfaction and retention for women. Conversely, younger and more seasoned males were less satisfied with work-life balance than their female colleagues; these results warrant further consideration about what contributes to dissatisfaction for men at these levels.

In examining factors that contribute to satisfaction with work-life balance, women and men identified supportive supervisor and supportive partner/family as the top two factors in work-life satisfaction, which is significant in that the supervisor's role continues to be a critical factor in the workplace environment. Women further identified flexibility of work hours and men identified supportive colleagues/peers as an additional factor in their work-life satisfaction, both of which could be linked back to the supervisor and the environment they help to establish. All of the identified factors were positively correlated with work-life satisfaction. It does not appear that having a standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work day or reduced work responsibilities relates to job satisfaction for men and women, supporting earlier assertions that student affairs professionals are not dismayed by additional work or after-hours responsibilities, but rather there are more important factors that contribute to job satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations for consideration in present analysis and for future research. The study lacks significant male perspective. Males made up only 28% of the sample population, whereas females were 72%. To address this disparity, a more gender-balanced sample should be sought for future research initiatives. Also, the data was collected at one point in a professional's time, generating only a current picture of work-life balance. While the data does describe a snapshot, it does not account for changes in perspective over the course of one's career. Future research should examine individuals throughout their career in student affairs to gauge changes in satisfaction with work-life balance.

Conclusion

The conversation surrounding work-life balance is often complex, subjective, and typically one-sided with respect to women. As society evolves, so do the roles and priorities of men and women. This study further enhances our understanding of the perceptions of work-life balance from a male and female perspective, suggesting that overall, men and women within the field of student affairs are more satisfied versus less satisfied overall and were equally satisfied with work-life balance. Additionally, this study contributes to our understanding of what factors are attributed to student affairs professionals' satisfaction with work-life balance and their current job, demonstrating more similarities than differences in regards to gender. The results presented here provide a springboard for future research on work-life balance within student affairs and suggest a more gender-inclusive conversation and investigation.

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