

Dear Colleagues,

The Committee on the Status of Women of the American Academy of Religion would like to invite you to participate in an examination of issues surrounding work/life balance. The committee is planning to develop a guide on this subject and is hoping that small groups all over the U.S. might meet to generate ideas about the topics and challenges that such a guide should cover and the potential solutions that it might lay out.

Work/life balance has emerged repeatedly as a concern at the annual mentoring lunches and at SWP special topics forums. Many things prevent women at all stages of academic life from achieving a satisfactory balance between earning a living and fulfilling other commitments and responsibilities, including care for self, children, elders, and extended family members. Some women face special challenges including disabilities and chronic health problems. Students and faculty struggle with finding balance even as they try to keep up with institutional expectations for professional progress. Poorly paid and professionally insecure adjuncts face additional difficulties. Many women in the academy seek some semblance of balance through informal and private rather than formal structures of support.

SWP would like to provide more resources to both graduate students and faculty members by developing an on-line guide on work/life balance which would address three dimensions of the issue: a) strategies for self-care and wellness for individuals at all stages of their careers, b) institutional policies and practices that support balanced lives, and c) value questions, especially vital for us as scholars of religion, raised by the concept of “a balanced life.”

Our goal in gathering women in focus groups is to begin an informal, constructive conversation about what exactly hinders women from achieving work/life balance, whether such balance is possible, and what conditions facilitate healthy balance. Our SWP committee has already hosted three small focus groups, and more information about our work and summaries of the discussions may be found at [http://www.aarweb.org/About\\_AAR/Committees/Status\\_of\\_Women\\_in\\_the\\_Profession/default.asp](http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Committees/Status_of_Women_in_the_Profession/default.asp). We would like to invite others throughout the U.S. to also hold small, informal focus groups and share with us the ideas that emerge either through a formal write-up that can be posted to our website or through contacting one of the members of SWP. Participants in our first groups found that—quite apart from what may come out of them—it has been personally useful to share experiences and strategies and develop relationships with colleagues. SWP will review all ideas shared with us as a starting point to develop foci for the on-line manual.

Since issues of balance affect everyone, we expect that the guide will be useful to all faculty members, women and men. We also expect that the values focus of the guide should be interesting to people beyond religious studies. Indeed, the triple focus of the guide—on personal and institutional dimensions of balance as

well as value questions—will differentiate the SWP guide from other literature in this area that tends to address only either personal or institutional issues.

If you are willing and able to join us for work in this project, please visit our guide to facilitating a focus group on the website. If you are unable to do so, we hope that you will still look at the discussions on our website. If you have some ideas you hope we will consider, please feel free to share them with any member of SWP. (Names of committee members are also on our website.)

Best,

Jacqueline Hidalgo

On behalf of the AAR Status of Women in the Profession Committee