

Work/Life Balance Focus Group Guide

In this guide, we have presented some recommendations for running a focus group conversation about issues of work/life balance.

Suggestions for Larger Organization of the Meeting:

Please make sure that you inform everyone you invite to the discussion that the purpose of this conversation is to generate ideas, topics, challenges, and solutions for a guide on work/life balance that AAR's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (SWP) will produce. If you are recording the conversation, taking notes, or plan to share a summary report with us (either in writing or orally), make sure that you have discussed each of these aspects with your participants. If you produce a written report, you should circulate it to all participants for approval and feedback within a reasonable amount of time.

You probably want to bring a group together in a comfortable and informal setting and set a careful timeframe for the discussion (say two hours). Additionally, you may want to invite participants from roughly the same rank. At the very least, you may want to make sure that graduate students and non-tenured faculty (part-time or full-time) are not in a focus group with senior faculty or administrators who may wield power over them.

Possible conversation questions and directions:

It may be best to start with a reminder of the purposes of the focus group and what sorts of topics you hope to cover.

Then, select an opening conversational question, such as "What advice would you give someone entering the profession?" or "What do you wish you had known?" After that, the conversation will probably move along organically, and if you are preparing a summary, you will likely have to pull out major themes and ideas.

Nevertheless, we have also generated a brief list of conversation turners in case the conversation is slow or there are particular issues of concern to you. You will probably never ask most these questions, but they might give you cues to draw from if you want to move the conversation in a certain direction. They also may provide a sense of some of the issues, challenges, and questions we are hoping to get further insights into as we develop our guide.

What personal issues have impacted work/life balance?

- How did/do you navigate raising children and achieving professional goals? How have children affected your career path? Did you see anyone have trouble with childcare that adversely impacted their career path?
- How has care for family members (partners, elders) impacted your work schedule? How have you seen other people navigate being caretakers, graduate students or professors, and whole human beings?

- Have you worked to balance a disability or a chronic health issue with your academic work? How have you observed others balancing a disability or a chronic health issue with professional demands?
- What practices for self-care have been important to you as you have negotiated academic life? Are there practices that have gone by the wayside that you have wished you could engage in?

How have institutional practices aided or hindered work/life balance?

- Has your institution (or institutions) provided mentoring and collegiality to help you navigate difficult moments in balancing work and personal matters? If so, what did it look like? Was it helpful?
- (If full-time faculty) What are you most concerned about as you approach or go through the tenure and/or promotion and/or contract-renewal process? (If part-time faculty) What are you most concerned about as you navigate part-time positions? (If a graduate student) What are you most concerned about as you navigate coursework, exams, and/or the dissertation?
- What do you wish someone had told you?
- What policies around coursework, research/writing, teaching, scheduling, facilities, etc. does your institution (or institutions) have that have helped or hindered your pursuit of work/life balance?
- What would you say to someone entering the profession? What piece of hard-won advice would you share?

What do we even mean by work/life balance?

- What are the values and commitments that undergird questions of work/life balance?
- What is the role of work in our identities? What “should” it be?
- What are the components of "life" in work/life balance (i.e., family, community, religious community)?
- How do we envision life and the place of work within it?

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