the changing profession

# Work-Work Balance, Metrics, and Resetting the Balance

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IN 1982, A YEAR AFTER I WAS APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR TWENTIETH CENTURY STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, Milwaukee (I had just received tenure), I met with a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, DC. "Aren't you a little young to be the director of a humanities center?" he asked. Notwithstanding the inappropriateness of the question, my point is that thirty years later I'm still in the same position, albeit at the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, Seattle. In a sense I haven't moved. I have consistently chosen to remain at this level in university administration, refusing the hierarchical ladder (chair, associate dean, dean, provost, president) in order to stay close to faculty and graduate student research, including my own, and relying on building networks across the campus and the country in order to have influence at my university and beyond. Two anecdotes—I think of them as short stories—illustrate why.

## Work-Work Balance

First, seven years after I had become the director of the humanities center at Milwaukee, the chancellor offered me the interim deanship of the School of Fine Arts. This was a remarkable opportunity, not least because it provided me the possibility of skipping several of the bureaucratic rungs on the proverbial ladder if I wanted to go *up*. It took me a week to decide—yes. I would be expanding my options for the future. I would be learning new skills. I would be *crazy* not to. But the morning I was to give my answer the uneasy feeling in my stomach told me—no. A few years earlier I had had a baby. But family wasn't the reason. More important to me was that I hadn't finished my second book. And, even closer to the truth, if I chose the interim deanship, there would be no going back to the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, where I regularly learned so much—from historians, film theorists, and video artists, from cross-disciplinary work in mass-cultural studies, continental and feminist theory, and autobiographical studies. I stayed in that position, seeking not the familiar

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work-life balance (with the default meaning of "life" being family, children in particular) but work-work balance.

My hope is that people smile when they read this formulation, for it is a kind of pun. But I am altogether serious. I wanted to continue administrative work, which in this case meant the shaping and organization of interdisciplinary research with groups of people, but I also wanted to continue my own work—research. Most administrative positions make that impossible, since they expand to fill the amount of time available and have no relation whatsoever to research. I can think of only a very few deans in our fields in the United States who have continued to pursue research (the redoubtable David Marshall at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is one). It seems to be all or nothing—administration or research—and I wanted both. (Here I should add that I am studious by temperament; even in middle school and high school I went to the library on the weekends to study, which is to say to work! But I'm also very social, one of the few people in the academy, apparently, who actually enjoy going to meetings.) Work-work balance may strike some as oddly cold, if not obsessive. But for me the administrative component of work has an all-important affective dimension, and this provides another meaning to the notion of balance.

Second, soon after moving to the University of Washington twelve years ago to be the director of the Simpson Center, I was included in an overnight retreat of some ten women in administration, most of whom have since gone on to be deans and provosts. At an informal evening session, we were all asked to describe what we found most rewarding in our positions. I had never articulated out loud an answer to that question. My answer? It was—and remains—bringing people together around common intellectual matters. Recently, for example, I gathered together—from the faculty, graduate students, and staff campus-wide—a group interested in popular music and sound studies; they came from departments of English, music, art, and American ethnic studies and the libraries. I know these people were happy to meet one another and to be involved in a collective and collaborative conversation. What concrete projects will emerge from it, if any, remains to be seen. But what was certainly in the air was that all-important intangible I will call *intellectual morale*, which has an important affective dimension. In *The Strategy of Letters*, Mette Hjort writes about the importance of the strategic generation of positive feeling in an academic context. She believes, as do I, that "social emotions tend to produce a very particular form of interdependence, namely *reciprocal interdependence*" (185–86). This is precisely what over the years I have wanted to help create in terms of collaborative intellectual work.

Similarly, since moving to the Simpson Center I have been involved in what has come to be called the public humanities. One of our initiatives—an annual weeklong institute for doctoral students on the public humanities—has vividly convinced me that new ways of imagining our scholarship as public goods, not just professional products, give our graduate students a greater sense of meaning, where before there was only a profession, not a calling. (The University of Michigan's inspiring Julie Ellison, the founding director of Imagining America, a national consortium devoted to public arts and scholarship, has not hesitated to call this hope.) I've proceeded in a deliberate, opportunistic, and optimistic way, bringing people together, often over food at what I call Agenda Lunches. Work like this is what makes my intellectual heart beat faster. It has kept me in the position of director of a humanities center. At the same time, my idea of what I can do in the position has expanded. In great part I have been able to choose what to put in my portfolio. Lately this has included addressing professional, structural, and emerging issues in higher education head on.

My basic point, first, is that we need to find ways to combine administration in the academy with scholarship and research. Among other reasons, doing so will improve the leadership of our institutions and will help attract more women into administration. In the late 1990s the University of Wisconsin constituted a task force devoted to equality for women across the state system. One of the recommendations of the task force's report was to increase the number of women in administration, and one of the fascinating findings I remember from a meeting devoted to the report is that, unlike men, women on the faculty would often commit themselves to an administrative position for a short period and then return to scholarship and teaching (Committee). I drew from this finding the conclusion that if we can find a way to build time for research into administrative commitments, we will have a greater chance of retaining women in such positions.[1] When presented with the opportunity, we need to negotiate not just for an increase in base salary, summer support, a research assistant, and travel funds but also for time to do research—for ourselves and for the health of academic institutions.

My basic point, second, is that we need to be wholly involved in what we do—intellectually and affectively—and that the creation of intellectual morale, which is itself an affective state, is a worthy goal. We need, in fact, to redescribe administration. Robert Gibbs, the director of the Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto, has remarked that there are administrators, managers, and keepers of ideas. I like his emphasis on intellectual leadership in higher education. We should first and foremost think of ourselves as stewards of ideas and creators of public goods rather than administrators or managers. We should also understand that we can take initiatives in any position, whether we are chairs, deans, or directors of centers.

But I have a new problem. Actually, two.

Today I find myself in a professional and personal crisis of sorts. Since childhood I've identified myself as a reader. And in striving for work-work balance I always knew in the past what my work—my research—entailed. It was reading and writing articles and books, editing books and journals, for print. Print was my medium. But with the digital revolution well under way, with screen culture jostling with print culture, with scholarly communication going multimodal, incorporating sound and image, with our profession so in need of more platforms for scholarship that engages public audiences, I am not at all sure what form my work will take in the future. I am eager, however, to experiment with the digital platform Scalar, which is designed for multimodal, long-form scholarship and is in development under the direction of Tara McPherson at the University of Southern California, even though I confess I don't know what focus a project of mine on Scalar might take.[2]

## Metrics

My other problem is the relentless turn to metrics in higher education as the common currency of evaluation. It is jeopardizing my feeling of work-work balance on both sides of the scale. I don't want to find myself measuring out my life—or that of the humanities—with metrics that call to mind J. Alfred Prufrock's coffee spoons.

As an undergraduate at Smith College, I majored in economics, submitting an honors thesis under the title "Milton Friedman: The Quantity Theory of Money Reborn"; as the economist James Tobin succinctly puts it, when it comes to healthy economic growth, Friedman believes that the supply of "money is all that matters" (481). But soon after graduating I enrolled in a series of graduate programs in literature in navy towns (long story short: I was married to a man in the navy). It surprised me to find that I loved the close study of language and of narrative, I loved learning the history of literature, and I loved the worlds—the rhythms, the tones and moods, the stories—created by the novel and poetry. I also loved theory. In due time I was awarded a doctorate in literature from the University of California, San Diego, with a dissertation on twentieth-century American poetry. And for decades I thought I had left behind the economist's numerical mind-set for the suppleness of language and the pleasures of narrative. But today I seem to have come full circle, inhabiting an institutional world in higher education where to a very real extent metrics are all that matter, with good metrics being shorthand for quantitative evidence that one's unit (a department, a division, a college, a university) merits an increase in the supply of money. Moreover, language—consider the reports that must be produced!—is flattened to the banality of both bureaucratic and sentimental prose, with the former focusing on numbers (the bigger, usually the better) and the latter on sound-bite stories about undergraduate students that are designed to loosen donors' purse strings.

What counts? What measures are invoked? What numbers are required? My institution, a large public research university, is not unique in having crafted what we call the Sustainable Academic Business Plan. The plan drew on the Program Evaluation Initiative, whose goal was to evaluate all academic departments by standard criteria and metrics. Here are a few of them. Student credit hours. Number of students graduated. Faculty FTE by source of funds. Faculty headcount by contract length. Staff FTE. Student scholarships. Sponsored research awards. Sponsored research assignable square footage relative to sponsored research awards. Undergraduate degree completion. Number of diversity faculty appointments. Metrics such as these have become the bureaucratic air we breathe, the quantitative atmosphere in which we live, one permeated by pie charts and bar graphs, numerical lists and totals, balance sheets and statements of cash flows. If Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* felt as if she were "walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless" (150), I often have the impression that dollar signs hang like flags from our buildings, our auditoriums, our rooms, and our chairs, announcing how much it would cost to name this structure, put your corporate logo here, hanging right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless.

What is being counted in terms of research at the departmental level in the humanities? In November 2010 we were asked to count our publications (books with single or multiple authors, edited books, journal articles, and book chapters but no single-book reviews, never mind scholarly Web sites) and to submit the aggregate numbers (not titles, not presses, but *numbers*). Departments were also "given the opportunity to write narrative statements that will help support the process of coming budget discussions" (Provost). How long were these narratives? Two pages maximum. Two pages? How can that be a *narrative*? We were narrating not substantive ideas but numbers in the service of metrics. And it should not be forgotten that, as Johanna Drucker points out in *Spec Lab*, the "very notion of a standard metric is ideological" (10).

As director of a humanities center, designated a nonacademic unit, I was not asked to submit either numbers or a two-page narrative; that's the good news and the bad news. But in order to try to participate in the dominant if not the only game in town, I itemized and aggregated data under several rubrics (how many faculty members supported by the center had received fellowships from national foundations and agencies; how many unique visitors came to our Web site). By far and away the most prominent category of data I devised was financial gifts and grants received by the Simpson Center over the past eleven and a half years, the spreadsheet of which I revised obsessively, finding myself waking up in the middle of the night to remember, *yes*, there was another gift we received, wanting to push the total over the top of ten million dollars, figuring that would be an impressive number—and with the last award to the Simpson Center in early December 2010, just in time to submit my document, we did precisely that: $10,047,383! (There seemed to be some sort of repetition compulsion operating here, as if counting—amassing numbers, assembling evidence under the rubric of a metric—would serve as a defense against being cut, financially.) Ten million in gifts and grants over the last eleven and a half years? That's large for a humanities center. But is it enough to convince the people who make the decisions? The figure may seem substantial, but at my institution, where in the fiscal year 2009 alone the School of Medicine received over $137 million in gifts and grants, my number deflates precipitously in comparison, along with my affect, only recently triumphant. Is this a case of academic envy, about which Marjorie Garber has so astutely written? To echo Prufrock, am I measuring out the life of the humanities—and my own—with what my institution thinks are coffee spoons, if not beans? It seems I have come down with a new syndrome, an institutional fear of small numbers, to allude to the title of a provocative book by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (although he takes the idea of small numbers in a completely different direction).

An institutional fear of small numbers? Actually, fear seems too outsized, too stimulating, in short too subjective an affect to describe the attachment to numbers that has penetrated what used to be my everyday literary life. In 1900 the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote in *The Philosophy of Money*, "Money, by and large, is most influential in those parts of our life whose style is determined by the preponderance of objective over subjective culture" (470). As Patricia Mellencamp pointed out in *High Anxiety*, "[T]he money economy is paradoxical, separating people *and* creating strong economic bonds" (37). Today finance capitalism dominates our economy, hence the financialization of daily life, as Randy Martin puts it—and hence an increasing attachment to, if not obsession with, numbers, with numerical calculations understood to be the only purveyors of the real, of truth.

I do not mean to imply that the collection and analysis of data are wrongheaded. Far from it. I agree with Robert Solow, who observes in *Making the Humanities Count: The Importance of Data*, "The humanities community itself, including its funders, knows deplorably little about what is taught to whom and by whom, how long it takes, where graduates and post-graduates go, what they do when they get there, and how many of them there are" (2–3). I applaud the Humanities Indicators Project, admirably championed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences's farsighted Leslie Berlowitz, which is seeking to redress this situation. The data collected and disseminated by the MLA are preeminently important, as we saw with the December 2010 release of the report of foreign language enrollments, which showed, among other things, that there have been significant increases in Arabic, Chinese, and Korean enrollments since 2002 (Furman, Goldberg, and Lusin). And Christopher Newfield's research demonstrating that the humanities generate more funds in higher education (through student credit hours) than do the sciences (through grants) is crucial.

Still, it seems inescapable to me that as members of the profession we are all becoming accountants now, if not financial planners, both at the level of an institution's central administration and at the level of professional daily life. The revenue society is a form of the risk society, producing the quantified self (department, college, etc.) as an effect of quantified, data-driven institutions, an instance of what Foucault has called governmentality. Numbers have taken up residence in my psychic life where once lines by Wallace Stevens and scenes from Virginia Woolf danced in my head. I need to reset the balance—and get back to work. The world of higher education is dominated by what Carlos Alonso has called a culture of accountability, where education is a commodity. But as the economic sociologist David Stark reminds us in *The Sense of Dissonance*, etymologically the term *accounts* is rich, connoting bookkeeping and narration, data and stories.

### Resetting the Balance

Thus, I come to the decision point in my small, personal professional story. It takes the form of a twinned resolution, first, to reset the balance of my life toward literary language (whether in print or on-screen) and detach myself from the numbing and addictive quantitative world of numbers and, second, to insist on the importance of space for collaborative intellectual work.

Literature provides us with equipment for living, as Kenneth Burke memorably said. We think and feel with literature, and universities and colleges are privileged places, if we understand them so and continue to make them so, places where such study is a living thing, a mode of inquiry, a form of knowledge, a measure of experience that can't be quantified, where literature is a touchstone and talisman, a companion and colleague, a medium in which we breathe—life. In her poem "Fidelity," Grace Paley writes that she can't abandon a book she has begun reading because the characters have become her "troubled companions" and "life had pages or decades to go / so much was about to happen to people." She is faithful to the worlds of books in an unapologetic embrace of what cannot be quantified. In Claire Messud's novel *The Emperor's Children*, one of the characters suggests malevolently that Danielle burn her books. It is impossible, Danielle responds: "I measure my life out in books" (344).

I was prompted recently to revisit Wallace Stevens, who reminds me in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" of the ideal the academy represents:

> Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
> Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which
>
> We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
> As on an elevation, and behold
> The academies like structures in a mist. (386)

The idea of the academy is a noble one, and we must not allow it to be dissipated by a stifling focus on metrics, which do not inspire, encourage contemplation, or yield aesthetic pleasure. For me the intellectual space created by a humanities center both represents and—this has been my good fortune in life—instantiates that ideal, one characterized by dialogue and debate, by intellectual communities (large or small, evanescent or long-lived) that are created out of the thought-provoking air of questions and of new objects of study, and by the enlivening expansion and circulation of curiosity, collaborative and collective, itself a valuable and infectious social feeling.

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## Notes

1. Perhaps not surprisingly, this recommendation did not make it into the report.

2. Scalar is being developed by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, which is based at the University of Southern California and has received support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. See scalar.usc.edu/anvc/.

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