

**Exploring Barriers to Work-Life Balance of Early Career Agriculture Teachers**

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### Introduction and Need for Research

Research has identified secondary agricultural education as a demanding profession requiring long hours (Torres, Lawver, & Lambert, 2009), exorbitant paperwork (Boone & Boone, 2007), and additional responsibilities (Torres, Ulmer, & Aschenbrener, 2008), resulting in the struggle to balance work and non-work responsibilities, commonly referred to as work-life balance (Murray, Flowers, Croom, & Wilson, 2011; Torres et al., 2009). More recent work has explored how work-life balance ability influences agriculture teachers' intentions to leave the profession. Sorenson, McKim, and Velez (2017) found agriculture teachers experience negative psychological strain as a result of negotiating multiple roles within the profession. Specifically, as the amount of work that interferes with family increased, intentions to leave the profession increased as well. While these results certainly contribute to the body of knowledge regarding how agriculture teachers interact with the demands and expectations of the profession, little research exists asking agriculture teachers, in their own words, to identify specific barriers to achieving work-life balance. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to add to existing literature by exploring barriers to work-life balance as reported by early career agriculture teachers in Oregon. This study attends to National AAAE Research Priority three, research question 15 identifying methods, models, and practices to support "success at all stages of their [ag teachers'] careers" (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

### Conceptual Framework

We drew from perspectives in organizational psychology to guide our study. Barber, Gratwicht, and Maloney's (2016) work builds from several self-regulatory perspectives with respect to work-life balance, defining it as "the extent to which one's perceived allocation of finite resources (physical, mental, emotional) matches one's progress toward or achievement of meaningful goals or expectations across all life domains (both work and nonwork) at a given point in time" (Grawitch, Barber, & Justice, 2010, p. 113). Under this conceptualization, work-life balance is viewed as a psychological and dynamic state influenced by the personal as well as the environment and acknowledges that role demands, expectations, and personal goals change over time. Work-life balance is also dependent on successfully managing multiple, limited resources and requires the individual to work toward meaningful goals which in turn, influence their well-being and performance (Barber et al., 2016).

### Methods

This exploratory study utilized a case study approach to illuminate how early career agriculture teachers in Oregon discuss barriers to work-life balance. This approach allowed us to examine a bounded system (i.e. place and time) using several forms of data to describe the case, provide themes, and triangulate our findings (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, we employed a particularistic approach due to our focus on a specific case (Merriam, 2009). Our case included 52 (47 females, 5 males) secondary agriculture teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience who attended the 2018 Oregon State University Early Career Agriculture Teacher conference. Data collection began during a researcher-facilitated interactive silent discussion where participants responded silently to eight questions posted on an 8' x 24' whiteboard. Questions included, *what are barriers to achieving balance?*, *how would you describe balance?*, *what does balance feel like?*, and *is balance achievable as an Ag teacher?*, among others. Participants recorded their thoughts, built off of others' responses, made connections between statements, and posed new questions using an individual whiteboard pen. This was followed by a 10-minute small-group discussion as well as a whole-group discussion to reflect on the whiteboard responses. Lastly, participants were asked to post additional insights anonymously on the online platform, Padlet. Data collection included 151 written individual responses recorded on the whiteboard, transcription of the video-recorded whole-group discussion, 72 written comments from the Padlet, and observational field notes each author recorded during the workshop. We began data analysis by converging our multiple sources of data

(Baxter & Jack, 2008) followed by a deductive coding process drawing on theoretical concepts from Barber, et al. (2016). After getting a sense of the data through initial reading, coding, and memoing, the data were analyzed by "...[organizing] repeating ideas into larger groups that express a common theme" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 61).

### Findings

As agriculture teachers engaged in the interactive silent discussion and additional workshop discussions, three themes emerged relating to barriers to achieving work-life balance. The three themes are *perfection*, *lack of support*, and *instructional tasks*. Participants identified internal factors such as their desire to achieve perfection as a barrier to achieving balance. For example, when asked *what is preventing you from achieving balance*, one participant wrote, "my own self. My own want to achieve perfection". Others recorded comments such as, "the 'need' to see 'everything' my first year" and, "the need to do everything the right way". Lack of support from the school administration as well as the community, emerged as participants discussed barriers to achieving balance. This surfaced as teachers recorded how their schools and communities did not support their endeavors or recognize them for their efforts. For example, one participant reflected, "community/staff doesn't see everything you do in the program". Other respondents wrote, "backing of school board" and, "boss telling me I'm not working hard enough". Participants also identified tasks associated with classroom instruction as barriers to achieving balance. This theme emerged as they mentioned the time required to grade assignments, plan lessons, and communicate with parents. For example, one participant wrote, "so many grades due each week". Others commented, "lesson plans/feeling prepared for the week", "grading/planning", and, "keeping up with parents and grades".

### Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Early career agriculture teachers identified both work (e.g., lack of support and instructional tasks) and non-work (e.g., the need for perfection) domains as barriers to achieving work-life balance. This supports Barber et al.'s (2016) claim that identifies multiple facets of one's life as exhausting a finite amount of resources. Participants in our study acknowledged their desire for perfection to be a barrier to achieving balance. This finding aligns with Barber et al.'s claim suggesting individual factors (e.g., socioeconomic and psychological characteristics) influence vulnerability in experiencing work-life conflict. What is still unknown is the source of this need for perfection. Is it a personality trait? An effect of implicit norms established in their work or professional community? Future studies should explore this phenomenon further, specifically as it relates to work-life balance. Participants also recognized the lack of support in their school and community, as well as demanding instructional tasks as a barriers to work-life balance. Barber et al. categorize these examples as work constraints, which, as a reflection of the overall work environment, can severely limit the ability to achieve work-life balance. It is understandable a lack of support would negatively impact an agriculture teachers' work environment. Yet, perhaps what is most interesting is how participants identified the fundamental duties of a teacher, instructional planning and assessment, to be a barrier to work-life balance. Why is this so? Do these tasks consume extensive resources? Why not identify other, additional duties of agriculture teachers (e.g., coaching CDE teams) to be barriers? Future research should explore these questions more thoroughly.

Understanding work-life balance, specifically barriers to achieving it, will continue to be an important endeavor as we prepare and support secondary agriculture teachers. This study provides a starting point to think critically about the work and duties of agriculture teachers, how we prepare them, and what we can do to help them continue to educate America's future agriculture leaders.

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