Perceptions About Work-Family Balance
Among DU Community Members
With Young Children

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY – WINTER 2017

SECTION 3: Personal Challenges
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Introduction

After carefully reviewing several interviews with DU community members, it can be concluded that there are many personal challenges that affect the families of the University of Denver community. In the end there are eight personal challenges found to be common throughout the interviews. These challenges affected each family in a similar matter but each family handled them differently.

The first item to address is the theme of Boundaries. In the interviews some interviewees specifically stated they made boundaries between family life, work and recreation. These boundaries are in place so parents do not have overlapping duties depending on their current activity. However, in the modern era with increasing technology it is hard for parents to get away from their work. Today most people have smartphones or laptops where they can receive emails and notifications from all over the world. At the University of Denver it is hard for a professor to get away from work if work is always in their pocket. It creates yet another struggle of how to set boundaries.

An additional aspect was the theme of control where parents would struggle to control their work life, family life, and even social life. Some interviewees were more stressed about this point than others, but they all wish to maintain order over their respective tasks. Control also goes along the line of the Time Management theme. This theme came up in almost every interview, where the parents would struggle to figure out how to handle the healthy work/life balance. In many cases where both spouses worked, it became harder to find more family time and more frequent to have someone other than a parent watch their children.
There was also a personal challenge of Transportation among the parents that were interviewed. Since the interviewees had very young children, most of them complained about the transportation situation for their children to get to school. Drop off and pick up times were hard with work hours and it became difficult to find carpools or nannies to watch their children. This is a difficult problem because parents have to organize transportation, work schedules, and many other things around each other.

A big concern for many families was their financial balance. It is very expensive to raise a child today in America and this is proven by the financial stress in families and the increase in number of households where both parents are working full-time. In some interviews there was a discussion about job salaries and how some institutions do not provide enough child support services, or affordable services.

We found differences in how student parents struggled compared to faculty and staff. This group may have the most personal challenges, where the student parent must study, work, and raise a child so time management is extremely important. Raising a family and working or going to school at the same time has many challenges, but the key to success is balancing them.
Home Challenges

Organization

Being able to stay organized is one personal challenge that many students, faculty, and staff experience while working at the University of Denver. Staying organized is needed in order to maintain happiness and reduce stress. Most interviewees explain that their ability to stay organized is about having an established system or way of doing things to prevent chaos. Being organized helps when times get tough and also helps to prevent mistakes in the future. Their ability to stay organized relies heavily on and directly correlates with their ability to manage time. Furthermore, staying organized within the context of family dynamics consists of being aware of all situations within the family. For example, who is going where, how they are getting there, who they will be with, how long they will be there for, and many other moving parts related to the family. Here are some examples of parents at DU staying organized with an established schedule or laid out plan.

This quote demonstrates and explains the importance of a calendar as a tool to help working parents stay organized. It also shows that staying organized under their circumstances is done by planning days or even months ahead. It also illustrates that organization is not only used to plan the parent’s life, but the child’s life as well. “I have like a family calendar that helps me coordinate kids schedules and then my work schedule, meetings, just different things that I need to prioritize throughout the day, and like every day and even months away.”
The next quote demonstrates a different side of organization by suggesting that without enough time, being organized can be difficult precisely because it includes scheduling beforehand. When circumstances change, it can be difficult to make those plans ahead of time. This professor goes as far as to say that Google Calendar is their best friend to demonstrate how working parents rely heavily on calendars to stay organized.

"Um, so our schedule. That’s probably the hardest part. The days I have class and Denver Public Schools is out of school. With enough notice, I can schedule so that my husband will take them skiing or something like that. So, because I have to be here...Google Calendar is our best friend, because, like you can sync up everybody’s calendar in the house."

This example describes a personal schedule and how the use of a planner is extremely important when trying to stay organized.

"I try to get sleep. I am a much happier person when I sleep. Kiddos can disrupt sleep a lot though so I don’t always have a lot of control over it but I try to go to bed around 10 every night and wake up at 6. I try to exercise when I can by either walking to work or biking, but that can sometimes be hard in the winter. Yes, I use a planner."

Finally, this excerpt provides a new insight aside from the other three quotes. The respondent confirms the use of a “schedule” of some sort but explains further that it is not the hardest part about the work/life balance. Rather, this quote suggests that the uncontrollable/unchangeable obstacles that come with working at DU are far more difficult.
Work-Family Balance at DU – Section 3: Personal Challenges

“Oh yeah, um I just mean that its really easy for me to block out my schedule. Like I can have two or three days a where I have class. Or I could take all night classes or all morning classes. So that is so nice. It’s not really the scheduling that I have a hard time with, it’s the work. I can totally take care of my daughter and work a little and be in classes. But it’s the homework and the group meetings and stuff that kills me. It’s really hard to make time for that stuff. Especially when I am home. But I make it work.”

All four quotes rely on some sort of tool, whether it be a planner or a calendar to stay organized, as well as having an established predetermined schedule that they try and follow as closely as possible in order to stay organized. A planner is a great way to be able to write down the entire family’s schedule, and keep important reminders. Organization is a personal challenge that many students, faculty, and staff have to overcome.

Boundaries

Many of the interviewees involved in the project cited their ability to set boundaries or compartmentalize as one of their most important tools in parenting while working. Broadly, we can identify the sub-theme of boundaries as a means of separating work life and home life. The sub-theme of Boundaries is present in nearly every interview transcript. In fact, some interviewees went as far as to say that setting boundaries and compartmentalizing time are their most valuable strategies for maintaining work/life balance.

Setting boundaries is an absolutely vital part of juggling many different tasks and responsibilities. This technique is especially invaluable for working parents, who not only have a variety of chores, tasks, and responsibilities, but who also have to behave differently at work and at home. They must be professional and productive at work, while at home they have to be good role models for their children, while still leaving time for some rest
and relaxation. In this, compartmentalization is an invaluable tool. By completely separating work from home, parents of the DU community can get all their work done while in “work mode” and can easily transition to a different state while at home, one that allows them to parent and get their housework done. Another service that setting boundaries can provide for parents in the DU community is the fact that it can help to reduce stress. By not bringing work home, parents can focus on spending quality time with their kids. Below are some quotes and examples of students, teachers, and faculty discussing their boundaries.

A professor sets boundaries in the following manner,

"I love teaching, I love reading, I love that stuff, and it all requires time so I constantly feel the tension between, either on a daily basis or a weekly basis, trying to find when can I really devote time and be present at home and not be distracted with work. So I get up at 5:30 and leave by 7:00 so I can get things done.”

This quote is a great example of setting a boundary to make time for oneself and personal interests aside from work. They explain that they wake up early and get to work so they have a sufficient amount of time to get things done and therefore are not working constantly at home. That is a great strategy, and although it may not be pleasant to have to wake up that early to get in some extra work, they can give their full attention at home. Another professor describe boundaries and his struggle to spend time with his children in the following quote,

"Umm... (sighs). I guess the biggest thing (challenge) is to... when I am home with my kids and not working or on the clock to not be looking at my phone checking emails… Umm unless I know I am expecting something, uh but what I do is not
life threatening (laughs) so um I feel like I have set up good parameters to stop the clock when I leave here and not be working when I am at home and paying attention to my family.”

This quote was eye opening. It is true in terms of what they said about their job not being life threatening. Work can wait sometimes, especially if you are off the clock, and it is easy to see that they are putting importance on making that boundary between home time, and work.

Many professors also critiqued email heavily for making it difficult to separate work and personal life. A professor said,

“Uh, the invention of email is probably the single worst thing that has happened to academia in terms of work life balance. So, it's very good, I think, for professor-student communication, but it's really hard to work-life balance, uh, because uh... In previous epics at the university and when I was in university 25 years ago, uh 24 years ago, uh professors would have office hours. Uh, they would be very standard, it would often times be four to eight hours per week. They would be in their office and you would go see them. And that was your communication. Uh, you didn't, you would never call them, uh, say after hours. And you certainly would never, there was no email, but you wouldn't even have thought of that. So I think faculty had it a little easier in terms of student relations and maintaining a work life balance.”

This quote illustrates how vital setting boundaries can be, and how emails have proven to be a challenge that the interviewees face when trying to compartmentalize work life and home life. Emails threaten the boundaries that DU faculty, staff, and students put in place in order to maintain work life balance.

**Emails**
According to class data, emails are an important but also stressful part of the population here at the University of Denver. Emails require people to take time away from their family and other leisure activities in order to reply. Often emails can easily pile up, which can cause an increase in stress and anxiety. This can cause bad moods as well as not being able to keep up with other important parts of life, for example, household chores and taking care of kids. Professional emails also take time to formulate before being sent. In addition to formulating an email, sending a grammatically correct email can be stressful as well. There are many factors that play into emails, and one major factor is the Internet. If there is no Internet, then emails cannot be sent.

This quote shows how emails can dramatically change lives, how efficient they can be, and how communication is different from person to person. This quote is from a faculty member of DU and shows how they despise the amount of time that is taken away from them for just replying to emails. In the past, they explain how people used to be more social with each other, and how professors are now sending emails instead of just walking two doors down to say something.

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The next quote is a great example of how a professor has been able to manage their time. It also gives an example of a strategy to spend more quality time with their family. "I’m not sure if you noticed, but I just won’t email you back if it’s past 5pm, um, I won’t read that until I get in at 8 o’clock in the morning..."

They were able to create a system that improves his/her life and gives them the ability to focus on themselves and their family outside of work. The mind is not always thinking about the emails that are pouring in and there is no more worry about having to constantly reply to emails.

The last quote gives an example of how another professor has been able to adapt to the world of emails in order to keep themselves under a certain amount work time. He/she will limit their students from sending them any emails and have the students reach out to other resources in order to get help. This professor also makes sure that they don’t spend too much time with anything, even when it comes to their own kids. If they feel that they are spending too much time with their kids, they will make them do tasks, such as cleaning their rooms, to allow him/her to reply to emails.

“Right, so in general I’m aiming for keeping teaching below 50 hours a week. Right, so that’s 25 hours for your class and 25 for their class. And if it gets significantly over that limit, I try to make an effort to try to make you guys not email me all the time or make these guys go to office hours of TA’s right. Things like that. Or conversely, if my kids are taking significantly more time than I deem appropriate, then I um, you know, make them go clean their rooms or stuff. You get it?”

In conclusion, we have found that emails take much needed time away from both home life and work life. Whether it is to reply or to create an email, it still requires people to take time away from their family. With these interviews, our findings shed a new light on how
professors who work at the University of Denver have shown how emails have impacted their lives.

**External Challenges**

**Control**

Control was a theme that appeared consistently while students analyzed their transcripts. These transcripts were a result of interviews conducted with people whose primary association with DU was a student, faculty member, or a staff member with a child under the age of 10. The definition of control is the power within an individual to conduct or direct one’s personal actions as well as influence the behaviors of those around them. Control can also be viewed as the direct handling and manipulating toward a desired result. Quotes taken from these interviews reflect this viewpoint.

The three quotes below, taken from three interviews, show that the theme control was prevalent in a multitude of interviews. There is a need for control in different aspects of the interviewees’ lives. They need to be able to separate work and family to an extent.

“I think the biggest thing is to be present where you are. And when I am at work I try to be completely focused on my players and my team and what we’re doing at work, and when I’m home I try to focus on my husband and my kid’s um and try not to let the two blend in as much as possible”

On the contrary, there needs to be a time that you can let go of control and allow for your children and family to grow. “You have to kind of, I can’t hyper control every part of what they are doing too, and they need that time to try things and have it not work”
Control, like many other things involved with raising a family, does not come in the blink of an eye. There needs to be a lot of practice and building of family relationships and dynamic before control really clicks into a family. “…There is a huge learning curve like time management…we had a lot of control on that (being able to do whatever they wanted at whatever time they wanted) …before and it’s not like that anymore…” The first quote exemplifies how important it is to maintain control over different aspects of life. This specific interviewee mentions how it is important to not only perform well in both aspects of their life, but also make sure work stays at work. This provides this interviewee the ability to stay focused in the situation they are in, and control it when necessary.

The second interviewee shows that while control is important, sometimes letting go of control is necessary to have better family dynamics. By letting go of control the interviewee benefits their own life as well their children’s, giving them the ability to make decisions for themselves, while giving the parent time to do their own things. The interviewee’s last quote shows that control, whether it be of your life or another’s, is something that can be practiced. Working to gain the insight into when it is appropriate to increase or decrease your control over a situation can be a valuable tool not only for yourself, but for those around you. Control or lack thereof is an important challenge faced by parents in the DU community.

**Financial Balance**

There are many things that go into being financially stable and balanced while still being able to take care of other aspects of your life. Financial balance is what
keeps most families going, it is primarily what allows people to get food and other necessities for life.

In the context of DU, financial balance determines how well a person may care for their child, what they will be able to give to their children, and what kinds of things they can do as a family. Finance plays a big role in the care of a child in terms of handling basic needs or in extras such as having a nanny or day-care. Not everything in regard to caring for a child revolves around money, but it does play a distinct role in the free time and stress caregivers may have. Some of those interviewed were not as worried about money and were able to talk more freely about other things regarding the care and upbringing of the child. Other parents and caregivers, however, felt that there was a great burden on them because they did not have as much money readily available, causing more stress.

Many of the students and the faculty of DU have expressed their frustration at the cost of childcare and how much support they are or are not getting from DU.

“Professors used to be much better paid from the normal salaries that used to be out there in the world so I think the idea of not being able to afford childcare has not really caught up with academia certainly the administration has not- we can't POSSIBLY pay for childcare on our salary.”

Those interviewed have expressed their frustration with the fact that it has become more expensive and there is little that DU itself offers to the students and faculty to accommodate their lives as parents.

Many of the student parents spoke about the fact that getting a job and being able to do things outside of school is becoming more difficult while supporting their family. Although they see that there needs to be a change in the financial state of their lives, they
cannot seem to find an easy, stress-free way of doing that. The more difficult the job
market gets, the more difficult it is to support a family.

“I think that a lot childcare takes effect before you’re hired they talk about leaky
pipelines and there are a lot of leaks to tenure and there’s a leak to associate
professor but I think there’s a huge leak of people who don’t get jobs to begin with
who had kids in grad school or right after especially as the job market becomes
more difficult.”

With the ever-changing job market, it gets increasingly harder to find a job that is
financially stable and that makes it easy to raise a child. It is the same for students who are
having issues with finding a job that pays well enough to let them support their family.

It is important to have a proper balance, not only for students, but faculty as well.
There is a wide range of things that can upset that balance and throw everything else out
of order, making life more difficult. Financial balance is seen differently among the
various interviews: stress levels, option of day-care or a nanny, and time spent with family
are a few examples. Those who do not have strong financial balance appear to be more
stressed and do not have access to day-care or a nanny and spend less time with family.
Finances affect how one is able to raise their children and support their family. There are
many struggles involved in family life and finance is a prominent one. It is important that
a family does not feel overwhelmed with the state of their finances, in order to raise a child
in a happy lifestyle.

**Issues Common to Students at DU**

Throughout the course of our interviews we found that there were stark differences
between student parents and faculty or staff parents. Students were found to encounter far
more obstacles and difficulties when adapting to being a parent. This group of students that were interviewed was broken up into undergraduate and graduate students. When analyzing these two subgroups we were able to differentiate several challenges between the two when raising a child. Within these subgroups, several subthemes were found. These consisted of time management, experience and flexibility.

Time management was found to be the most consistent theme between the two subgroups. Both groups had to balance the responsibilities of raising a child while also attending classes and working. The lack of ability to freely choose a range of times for classes, as well as a lack of registration priority, seemed like the largest conflict for student-parents. Undergraduate parents claimed to enjoy a bit more scheduling flexibility as compared to the more rigid scheduling and responsibilities of a graduate student. We were very surprised to find out through our interviews that student-parents were not given priority when registering for classes. We thought that this would be a crucial aspect that could drastically help these students with their time management and scheduling.

A significant difference between undergraduate and graduate parents was the amount of life experiences they had. The responsibilities of raising a child as an undergraduate can be shocking, unexpected and vast. The graduate students we interviewed were significantly older, ranging between mid-20’s to early 30’s. With this age gap, we found that the amount of life experience and maturity of graduate students provides them with a large advantage when balancing parenthood with their studies.

As students move forward in their studies, the rigor and flexibility of their schedules become much more intense. Between undergraduates and graduate students, the results of our interviews found that graduate students found the lack of flexibility extremely difficult
to manage. Group projects and intense class schedules resulted in more reliance of outsourced daycare and childcare.

Regardless of age or academic status, throughout our research we found that raising a child while still involved in academics posed some serious management and balancing skills. The responsibilities of being a student posed more difficulty when raising a child than it did for a faculty or staff member.

Conclusion

In this report, we examined constraints and obstacles faced by working parents with children under ten years old in the University of Denver Community. Specifically, this section discussed some of the many personal challenges facing parents. These challenges—Boundaries, Control, Emails, Financial Balance, Organization, Time Management, and Transportation—were discussed as they apply to parents. Since this is a university, it was important to include student parents, who face many of the same challenges as faculty and staff.

The section on Boundaries explored how parents separate spheres of their lives in order to function more effectively. This allows parents to separate their work self from their home self. For parents, being home and present for their children requires more effort than coming home and going straight to a room to keep working. Setting effective boundaries is an important tool for parents as it helps their mental health, allows for better time management, and results in better nurturing time with their children.

Related to Boundaries is the theme of Control. This section showed how parents attempt to assert control over their work and home lives, and to what degree control is
possible or useful. Parents assert control by setting boundaries as discussed above. An important question that parents must wrestle with is what level of control they should have over their children. Micromanaging is neither practical nor preferred, but unhindered children may get themselves in trouble. The degree to which control is possible in a parent’s life, as in control over their schedules or in unforeseen situations, is a question parents struggle with, and approach in different ways. In many ways, it is a constant balancing act for parents.

Conflicting with the above two themes are Emails. This breaks down boundaries between work and home as they are accessed from both places. They reduce the amount of control one has over their schedule since people constantly check their email either on their phone or on a computer. Even parents who are successful at creating boundaries between work and home have difficulty not letting work enter the home through emails. Emails cause anxiety when not answered, and they take away from family time when they are. Some parents do successfully maintain a separation between work and home. Although it may be frowned upon and not appreciated at the workplace, some parents will not answer emails when at home. Email inundates and can overwhelm parents today, but that does not mean that strategies are not developed to maintain a healthy home life.

Financial Balance is crucial for parents, and children are expensive. What we found is that parents believe raising children is becoming more expensive. This is a push and pull dilemma. On the one hand, children’s activities, such as childcare, sports, or outings can place substantial financial burden on parents. On the other, some parents are finding the job market not sufficient in finding adequate jobs that fit their qualifications and pay for their mounting expenses. Stress over making enough money to pay for childcare, or taking
time off to personally take care of children, is a situation that many parents are in. This stress impacts their work and their home life, and seems to only be increasing.

With all these burdens, remaining Organized is essential for parents. Parents must organize their own time, cooperate with their spouse or partner if they have one, and organize their children’s time. This takes considerable forethought and planning. Staying organized with different tools was a strategy that we found parents employ in order to stay afloat and reduce stress. Given the multifarious demands and requirements of parenthood, this seems to be the only way to functionally operate a family.

Similarly, Time Management was a theme that parents brought up consistently in the interviews. This is different from organization as it is less about "planning ahead" and more about being productive with the time you have. Work often comes in waves. When parents are especially busy they need to adjust how they allocate their time in order to make room for their increased workload. Successful time management helps facilitate a successful work-life balance.

Transporting children, especially from school, is one of the major duties that parents must manage. For most parents, the time their children need to go to school and the time they get home somewhat defines their day. The expense associated with before and /or after school childcare, or the lack of its availability, often constrains a parent’s workday as they try to coordinate getting their children to and from school. Although professors in the DU community arguably have the most flexible schedule, many must condense their teaching into the time between school drop off and pickup. This task is compounded when a parent has multiple children attending different after school activities. Also, an interesting comment brought up was simply the time wasted driving to and from places. For a parent
strapped for time, the minutes that it takes driving without their child and not being productive is frustrating.

The above themes apply to all parents, but we wanted to focus some special attention on members of the DU community that were student parents. Within the subgroup of student parents, graduate and undergraduates dealt with their dual responsibilities differently. Graduate students were typically older, and had more rigid and demanding academic schedules. Undergraduates on the other hand had schedules that are more flexible. Undergraduates struggled more with their dual identity of student and parent. Neither group receives priority registration, which is surprising since they have a lot to manage and face a considerable amount of time constraints.

Our research resulted in two recommendations for the University of Denver. First, provide a childcare or daycare option that is available to everyone. Fisher exists, but for many it is not feasible financially and it is not a day care facility for those with younger children. Second, the university needs to give students with children preferential treatment. At the very least, they should be entitled to priority registration. Additionally, resources for student parents should be made more accessible and visible since most students do not even know what kinds of options DU provides. We feel these recommendations will significantly ease the burden placed on parents within our campus community.