

## **Balancing Acts and Wobbling**

Niara Nichols

In the years preceding the pandemic, my work-life balance left much to be desired. I spent fifteen exhausting hours each day engaging with classes and extracurricular responsibilities. The time I spent relaxing or seeing friends was sporadic and often reserved for the few minutes I checked in with my suitemates before bed. Things shifted in 2020 when, in an effort to adjust to the peculiarities of online learning forced upon us by the pandemic, my closest friends and I began to video call each other daily. We alternated between working in silence and taking breaks. After a certain hour, we stopped working and chose a virtual activity to do together or worked on our respective hobbies. It was through the structure my friends provided me that I learned to draw a hard line between academics and recreation. I began to take breaks between work, designated certain hours of the day towards academics, and took the time to relax, have fun, and rediscover the hobbies lost to my color-coded schedule. This regime helped me finish my undergraduate degree without the exhaustion I saw in my peers.

Despite this victory, I found myself wobbling as my balancing act came to a head with the start of my PhD this semester. Graduate school demanded the long hours I had sworn off. It meant spending weekends on campus taking exams or secluded in my room studying. I had less and less time for the hobbies that once kept me grounded. I was walking backwards towards the fifteen-hour days that used to consume me. I had read think pieces about the graduate student who practically lived in their lab and survived off only caffeine and spite. It was a caricature I swore I would not embrace. Yet, that is who I was becoming only one semester into graduate school. I knew something had to change before I completely burnt out.

In the face of another descent into disaster, I used the same strategies that had gotten me through the pandemic to reestablish the equilibrium I worked hard to create. I managed my time better so I could stop working after a certain hour; I did not take on more than I could handle like I have been known to do in the past; and I prioritized adding time for hobbies and friends into my schedule so I could look forward something when I was off the clock. I put an abundance of work into creating my new balancing act, but it was worth it in the end. In my academic life, my reinvigoration allowed me to make headway in the research I plan to do for my dissertation. I have excelled in my classes while staying on top of teaching responsibilities. I even managed to participate in extracurriculars. Currently, I am collaborating with a professor from Rochester to organize graduate programming for a regional chemistry conference this fall. Outside of my budding academic success, I joined a dance group on campus and am preparing for our big show. I also volunteer weekly at a local rock-climbing gym so I can learn more

about the sport. I make time to call my friends and family every week while also making time for myself to relax. I have renewed interest in my hobbies and begun bullet journaling and learning how to draw. As I settle into my new role, I am comforted by the people and the tools that have allowed me to adapt and thrive in the past. Despite wobbling, I am confident I can thrive in my balancing act between graduate school and life.