

10 Work-Life Balance Tips for MBA Students

MBA applicants can learn from students who have mastered juggling school, work, and extracurriculars.

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Although tough, achieving a work-life balance in an MBA program doesn't have to be like having your cake and eating it, too, say MBAs and business students and professors.

At Fordham University's School of Business Administration, for example, MBA and executive MBA students are offered monthly yoga sessions, a wellness program, and meditation exercises—in the school's Jesuit tradition—to help them cope with the "immense pressure" of b-school, says Francis Petit, the associate dean for executive programs.

When it comes to that pressure, Samuella Becker is experiencing "déjà vu with life-balance issues" as a doctoral candidate in business administration at Pace University's Lubin School of Business and the founder of a public relations agency. She's currently drawing on work-life balance techniques she developed juggling her marketing MBA studies at Lubin in the mid-1980s with her job as communications director at First Investors in New York and her social life.

She's one of several b-school insiders offering tips for MBA applicants who hope to balance their studies and life outside of school.

1. Consider a job without travel: If your job requires travel at least 25 percent of the time, you're going to be lugging a suitcase to class and rushing to the airport during breaks, warns Becker. She left a Fortune 200 company—with travel 30 percent of the time—for a domestic position at an investment firm with no travel.

2. Weigh family planning: If you plan to have a child soon, try to time the arrival after graduation, if possible, advises Becker, who was pregnant during the last nine months of her part-time MBA. "My classmates ... [were] taking bets as to whether I'd take my finals on time," she says. "I did, but my son arrived two weeks early—a week before my finals."

3. Balance course difficulty: Offset difficult analytical classes with ones that have less mathematics, recommends Todd Dewett, who has taught management for a decade at Wright State University's Raj Soin College of Business. "Balancing a numbers course with talk of leadership or marketing or law keeps the worst headaches at bay," he says.

4. Go "off duty:" Designating two "off duty" chunks of time each week—one for you, and one for any significant others—that are free of school work is vital, according to Dewett. "Be serious about using these time blocks and seek support from your significant others to follow through," he says.

5. Be honest about your limitations: Clarify your limitations with the "flexible" parties in your life, says Ben Cober, a recent Indiana University—Bloomington Kelley School of Business MBA grad. "Explaining why you can't do things, and saying 'no' is OK, and appreciated if people understand why and ahead of time," he says.

6. Limit credit hours: Twelve credits a semester may work in college but not in business school, advises Ericka Smith, a recent University of Wisconsin—Whitewater College of Business and Economics MBA grad. "Exceeding nine credits is going to be physically and mentally demanding," says Smith, who juggled her MBA studies, a Habitat for Humanity board position, a full-time marketing job, and raising a four-year-old son.

7. Exercise regularly: As an MBA student at the College of Business at University of Texas—San Antonio in the mid-1990s, Zan Jones worked full time, served on a nonprofit board, and taught fitness and aerobics two evenings a week. "Exercise helped me stay healthy and have more energy, and being forced to exercise kept me active," she says.

8. Don't skimp on sleep: Instead of burning the midnight oil, Jones woke up at 4:30 a.m. sharp, studied for an hour or an hour-and-a-half, and then went back to sleep until 7 a.m. "Instead of waking up tired from being up half the night, I would wake up feeling relatively rested," she says.

9. Outsource: MBA students need to delegate responsibilities where possible. On a recent panel of former executive MBA students at Arizona State University's W. P. Carey School of Business, someone joked about the importance of hiring a gardener, says Stacey Whitecotton, the school's associate dean for MBA programs. "Even though it was funny, you seriously need to realize that you can no longer do everything you used to do," she says.

10. Limit TV watching: If you insist on having a television, store it in a closet and only bring it out for must-see programs, says Lubin management professor Bruce Bachenheimer. But that doesn't mean have no fun.

"Eat, drink, and be merry without feeling guilty," he says. "Work hard for that time to relax and savor it."

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