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Illusions of Flexibility among Academic Careers: Contradictions and Competing Expectations within Faculty Cultures

Jamie Ladge
j.ladge@northeastern.edu

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An external assumption exists for many professors that our careers are flexible. We often are subject to comments such as, “it must be great to have the summers off” in which it is assumed that we only teach and do little else. Yet, teaching only represents a portion of what most tenured and tenure track faculty do as we are also expected to conduct research and engage in service inside and outside of our institutions. In this thought paper, I will explore the “illusion of flexibility” and how it contradicts reality within academic cultures that are often plagued by overwork associated with establishing a “career trifecta” in which excellence in teaching, research and service must be simultaneously achieved. In their quest for excellence in all three areas, faculty may find themselves managing competing expectations within each domain. For example, students and curriculum coordinators expect faculty to be devoted to their students while department chairs and peers expect faculty to be devoted to publishing in high quality journal outlets. University administrators and the business community impose demands upon faculty to comment on current events in the media and engage in and or lead organizational change and policy initiatives across campus and beyond. These competing expectations can also cross over to nonwork domains and often carry gendered implications. For example, women faculty who are mothers may use this illusion of “flexibility” to portray themselves in a more positive light by others in their home life, while they may be simultaneously trying to downplay their parenting roles at work. Men on the other hand, may downplay any flexibility assumed in their academic careers to be portrayed as more masculine and “hardworking” by others (Ladge & Little, 2018). In this paper, I will address these contradiction and competing expectations within faculty cultures that lead to work overload and burnout by drawing upon prior research, generating new research questions and suggesting avenues for future *research*.