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Balancing Work, Study and Time: Lived Experiences of Working Graduate Students in Navigating Academic and Pedagogical Demands

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

Working while pursuing graduate education creates a complex intersection of professional responsibilities, academic expectations, personal commitments, and limited time. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of working graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated as they navigate academic and pedagogical demands while maintaining employment. Specifically, the study examines how participants manage competing responsibilities, experience graduate-level pedagogical practices, negotiate conflicts between work and study, and develop strategies that enable persistence in graduate education. Working graduate students are selected through purposive criterion sampling, and data are generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview data are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning across participants' experiences. The proposed analytical domains include living between professional and student identities, time as a scarce and negotiated resource, learning after working hours, connecting professional experience with graduate learning, and persistence through personal and social support. The study is theoretically informed by Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and Boundary Theory, which provide complementary perspectives for understanding adult learners' pedagogical needs and their negotiation of work–study boundaries. The study contributes to graduate education literature by highlighting the importance of flexible, relevant, experiential, and supportive pedagogical environments for employed graduate learners. Findings may inform institutional policies and teaching practices designed to promote graduate student engagement, persistence, and academic success.

Keywords: working graduate students; time management; work–study balance; graduate education; pedagogy; adult learning; phenomenology

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Introduction

Graduate education has become increasingly important for professionals seeking career advancement, specialized knowledge, leadership opportunities, and continuing professional development. Unlike many undergraduate students, however, graduate learners frequently pursue advanced education while simultaneously maintaining employment and fulfilling family, community, and professional responsibilities. Their academic experiences consequently occur within a complex environment where time, energy, attention, and personal resources must continually be negotiated among competing roles.

The experiences of working graduate students are particularly significant within Philippine higher education. Recent Philippine research has documented the difficulties experienced by employed graduate students in balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025), for example, found that working graduate students encountered challenges involving time management, financial pressures, and emotional exhaustion while relying on organizational strategies and external support to continue their studies. More recent phenomenological research involving Filipino graduate working students similarly identified the overwhelming demands of dual roles, professional and personal growth, interaction between work and academic experiences, and resilience as important dimensions of their graduate journeys.

Time represents one of the most critical resources for working learners. Unlike students whose schedules can be primarily organized around academic requirements, employed graduate students must negotiate coursework around working hours, professional deadlines, meetings, travel, family responsibilities, and personal needs. Consequently, time management is not simply an individual organizational skill. It represents an ongoing process through which students establish priorities, negotiate boundaries, make sacrifices, and decide which responsibility requires immediate attention.

Research involving working students has demonstrated the importance of these boundary-management processes. Students employ temporal and communicative strategies to manage their work and study identities, and such strategies are associated with work–study balance and academic satisfaction. Philippine studies similarly identify structured time management, prioritization, motivation, support systems, and personal discipline as important mechanisms through which working learners manage overlapping demands.

However, framing the experience exclusively as a problem of individual time management risks overlooking broader institutional conditions. Working students may encounter fixed schedules, demanding workloads, compressed deadlines, limited flexibility, and pedagogical expectations that do not always reflect their professional circumstances. Recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that work–study balance can always be achieved through individual resilience and better scheduling, emphasizing that institutional structures can either enable or constrain students' capacity to maintain multiple roles.

This observation makes pedagogy particularly significant. Working graduate students are adult learners who enter classrooms carrying substantial professional knowledge and lived experience. Graduate pedagogy can therefore become more meaningful when teaching practices connect theoretical knowledge with workplace realities, encourage reflection, provide opportunities for collaborative inquiry, and recognize learners as active contributors to knowledge construction.



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Knowles' conception of andragogy provides an important foundation for understanding these learners. Adult students are generally characterized as self-directed and experience-rich learners who are motivated when learning is relevant to immediate professional or personal needs. Graduate education for working professionals should therefore move beyond information transmission toward pedagogical practices involving authentic problem solving, critical reflection, professional application, research engagement, collaboration, and meaningful dialogue.

Working while studying may also produce positive academic-professional connections. Knowledge acquired in graduate school can potentially be applied to workplace problems, while professional experiences can provide concrete contexts for understanding theoretical concepts. Graduate education can consequently function as a space where workplace practice and academic knowledge continuously inform one another.

Nevertheless, the demands of graduate study remain substantial. Philippine graduate students have reported challenges involving work–study balance, time management, academic resources, research requirements, finances, and well-being. Employment alongside graduate study is common in the Philippine context, making institutional responsiveness particularly important.

Despite growing scholarship on working students, much research focuses on undergraduate populations, academic performance, or general work–study balance. Less attention has been directed toward understanding how employed graduate students experience the intersection of time management and pedagogy within a specific institutional context. Understanding these experiences is important because graduate learners' persistence may depend not only on their ability to organize time but also on whether institutional and pedagogical conditions recognize the realities of adult professional learners.

Against this background, the present study explores the lived experiences of working graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated, focusing on how they navigate employment, graduate education, time constraints, and pedagogical expectations.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of working graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated as they navigate the simultaneous demands of employment and graduate education. Particular attention is given to their time-management practices, academic challenges, experiences of graduate pedagogy, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of institutional and instructional support.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do working graduate students describe their experiences of simultaneously fulfilling professional and academic responsibilities?
2. How do they manage their time while balancing employment, graduate coursework, and personal responsibilities?
3. How do working graduate students experience the pedagogical practices employed in their graduate courses?



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4. What challenges do they encounter in meeting academic and professional demands?
5. What strategies and support systems enable them to persist in graduate education?
6. How do their professional experiences influence their graduate learning, and how does graduate education influence their professional practice?

Review of Related Literature

Working While Pursuing Graduate Education

Working graduate students occupy multiple roles simultaneously. They are employees, students, professionals, and often parents, spouses, caregivers, or community members. Each role carries expectations that compete for finite resources such as time and energy.

Philippine evidence illustrates these pressures. Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found that working graduate students experienced significant challenges in balancing school, work, and personal life. Time-management difficulties, financial pressures, and emotional exhaustion emerged alongside strong motivations related to career advancement and personal development.

A 2026 phenomenological study of graduate working students in Metro Manila likewise reported that managing dual roles could be overwhelming, while graduate education simultaneously represented an avenue for self-growth. Participants developed resilience as they negotiated the interaction between employment and academic responsibilities. These findings suggest that working and studying should not be conceptualized solely as competing activities; they can also become mutually influential dimensions of professional development.

Time Management as a Negotiated Resource

Time management frequently emerges as one of the most important concerns among working students. Structured scheduling, task prioritization, deadline management, and deliberate allocation of study periods can help learners maintain academic responsibilities despite employment.

A Philippine phenomenological investigation of working students identified structured time management among the central themes explaining how participants negotiated dual responsibilities. Support systems, motivation, personal growth, and skills development also contributed to their persistence.

Similar patterns have been documented among doctoral learners in the Philippines. Working doctoral students reported prioritizing deadlines, establishing dedicated research periods, working during evenings, and sacrificing leisure time to manage overlapping professional, academic, and family responsibilities.

However, time management should not be treated as an exclusively personal responsibility. Institutional schedules, assignment design, course requirements, workplace expectations, and family obligations shape how much control students actually possess over their time.

Work–Study Boundaries

Boundary Theory provides a useful perspective for examining how individuals navigate multiple roles.



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Working graduate students continually move between professional and academic domains. At certain moments, these boundaries remain relatively clear; at others, they overlap.

Research involving working university students has demonstrated that temporal boundary strategies can contribute to improved work–study balance and academic satisfaction. For graduate professionals, this may involve protecting designated study periods, negotiating work schedules, completing academic activities after working hours, or strategically integrating workplace experiences into academic requirements.

Yet balance is not always fully achievable. Hammond's recent research argues that emphasizing individual resilience can obscure structural conditions that make work–study balance difficult, including inflexible schedules and financial pressures. This perspective is valuable because it shifts part of the analytical attention from “How well do students manage their time?” toward “What institutional conditions enable students to manage their multiple responsibilities?”

Adult Learning and Graduate Pedagogy

Graduate students who are employed professionals bring substantial experience into the learning environment. Adult learning theory suggests that such experiences should become pedagogical resources rather than remain separate from academic instruction.

Graduate pedagogy for working professionals can therefore emphasize problem-based activities, case analysis, research applications, reflective practice, collaborative learning, and tasks connected with authentic workplace challenges. Such approaches recognize that adult learners frequently evaluate academic experiences according to their relevance to professional practice.

The connection between employment and graduate learning may consequently be reciprocal. Workplace experience provides examples through which academic theories become understandable, while graduate learning introduces conceptual frameworks that enable professionals to reconsider workplace practices.

Support Systems and Persistence

Persistence among working students is rarely an entirely individual achievement. Family members, colleagues, classmates, faculty members, supervisors, and institutions can all influence students' ability to continue graduate education.

Recent Philippine studies emphasize organizational strategies and external support as important resources for working graduate students. Research among working doctoral students similarly highlights professional networks, mentors, peers, digital resources, and personal strategies as resources for negotiating academic and professional pressures.

Supportive pedagogy therefore does not necessarily mean lowering academic standards. Rather, it can involve maintaining rigorous learning outcomes while providing clear expectations, meaningful deadlines, relevant learning activities, constructive feedback, and reasonable flexibility.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored primarily in Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) and complemented by Boundary Theory.



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Knowles' framework is appropriate because participants are adult graduate learners who bring accumulated professional and personal experiences into the educational setting. The theory emphasizes self-direction, experience, readiness to learn, problem-centered learning, and relevance. From this perspective, graduate pedagogy becomes particularly meaningful when students can connect academic concepts to authentic professional concerns.

Boundary Theory complements this perspective by explaining how individuals construct and negotiate boundaries among different life roles. Working graduate students must continually determine when and how to transition between employee, student, and personal identities.

The conceptual relationship guiding the study can be represented as:

Professional Responsibilities + Academic Demands + Personal Responsibilities → Time and Boundary Negotiation → Pedagogical Experience → Coping and Support → Persistence and Professional Learning

The framework recognizes that students' experiences are shaped not merely by individual discipline but by interactions among personal strategies, professional conditions, institutional expectations, and pedagogical practices.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of working graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated. Phenomenology is appropriate because the inquiry seeks to understand how participants experience and assign meaning to the shared phenomenon of pursuing graduate education while maintaining employment. Rather than measuring work–study balance through predetermined numerical indicators, the study centers on participants' narratives concerning time, workload, learning, sacrifice, adaptation, and persistence.

Participants are selected through purposive criterion sampling. Eligible participants are graduate students currently enrolled at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated who are simultaneously employed and have sufficient experience balancing employment and graduate studies to provide information-rich accounts. Approximately 10–15 participants may be recruited initially, with the final sample determined by the richness and adequacy of the qualitative data.

Data are collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview questions explore work–study experiences, time-management practices, academic workloads, pedagogical experiences, professional applications of graduate learning, challenges, coping strategies, and sources of support. With participants' informed consent, interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data are analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, involving repeated familiarization with transcripts, systematic coding, development of candidate themes, theme refinement, naming and defining themes, and production of an interpretive account. Analysis remains primarily inductive while Adult Learning Theory and Boundary Theory serve as sensitizing frameworks for interpreting participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness is strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, an audit trail, peer debriefing, participant clarification when necessary, and thick description. Ethical approval should be obtained from the appropriate research ethics body before recruitment. Participants should receive informed-consent information explaining confidentiality, voluntary participation,



recording procedures, and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms or participant codes should be used throughout the study.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Living Between Two Worlds-Professional by Day, Student by Choice

The first theme captures the participants' experience of continuously shifting between their identities as professionals and graduate students. Employment provided participants with financial stability, professional experience, and opportunities for career advancement, while graduate education represented personal aspiration, professional development, and the pursuit of higher qualifications. However, fulfilling these two roles simultaneously required continuous adjustment. Professional responsibilities did not disappear when academic requirements became demanding, and academic deadlines remained even during periods of heavy workloads at work.

One participant may describe the experience in the following way:

Participant 1: "During the daytime, my priority is my work because I have responsibilities that I cannot leave unfinished. But when I get home, I become a student again. Sometimes I am already physically tired, but I still have readings, reports, or assignments that need to be completed."

Another participant may similarly explain:

Participant 4: "There are days when I have deadlines both at work and in graduate school. I cannot simply choose one because both are important. I have to adjust and find a way to finish everything even if it means sleeping late."

A third participant may highlight the motivation underlying the struggle:

Participant 7: "It is difficult to work and study at the same time, but I chose graduate school because I want to improve professionally. I remind myself that the difficulties are temporary and that finishing my degree can open more opportunities for me."

These accounts demonstrate that working graduate students experience what may be described as dual-role negotiation. Their identities as employees and students operate simultaneously rather than independently. Conflict occurs when expectations from one role compete with the time and energy required by the other. At the same time, the participants' willingness to continue graduate education despite these challenges reflects their perception of advanced education as an investment in professional and personal development.

This finding closely corresponds with the Philippine phenomenological study of Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025), which examined 16 working graduate students. Their participants were motivated primarily by career advancement and personal growth, but they simultaneously experienced difficulty balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Time-management problems, financial pressures, and emotional exhaustion were among the major challenges identified.

Similar patterns are evident in broader research on work–study role boundaries. Research involving working university students found that work and study roles require active boundary management and that students' identities and temporal boundary-management strategies were associated with work–study balance and academic satisfaction. Research by O'Mahony and Jeske also showed among postgraduate



students that study, work, and personal responsibilities are negotiated through temporal boundaries, with competing obligations sometimes producing social and personal difficulties.

The findings can therefore be interpreted through Boundary Theory. Participants repeatedly cross the psychological and temporal boundary between being an employee and being a graduate student. These boundaries are sometimes clearly separated for example, professional responsibilities during working hours and graduate activities during evenings but frequently overlap when employment duties extend beyond regular hours or academic deadlines coincide with workplace demands.

The theme further suggests that the experiences of working graduate students should not be reduced to the idea that they simply have “too much work.” Their deeper challenge involves maintaining two demanding identities that simultaneously require commitment, competence, and accountability. Graduate persistence consequently involves continual negotiation rather than the achievement of a permanently stable work–study balance.

Theme 2: Every Hour Counts-Time as a Scarce and Negotiated Resource

The second theme illustrates the central role of time management in participants’ graduate-school experiences. Participants may describe time not simply as something to be scheduled but as a limited resource that must continuously be distributed among work, academic requirements, family responsibilities, rest, and personal life.

One participant may explain:

Participant 2: “I really need to plan my week. I write down my deadlines and arrange my tasks according to urgency. If I do not plan ahead, my work requirements and school requirements can overlap.”

Another participant may emphasize the sacrifices required:

Participant 5: “Most of my schoolwork is done at night or during weekends. Sometimes weekends are supposed to be for rest or family, but when there are reports or requirements, I use that time for graduate school.”

A further response may illustrate how fatigue persists despite effective organization:

Participant 9: “I think I manage my time well because I know my priorities, but being organized does not mean that I am not tired. There are times when everything is scheduled properly but there are simply too many things that need to be done.”

Three important patterns emerge from these accounts: planning around professional schedules, prioritizing according to urgency, and sacrificing leisure or rest to create academic time. Participants may employ calendars, lists, reminders, advance preparation, and designated evening or weekend study periods. However, these strategies do not necessarily eliminate exhaustion because effective scheduling cannot increase the total amount of time available.

This pattern is strongly supported by recent Philippine evidence. A 2026 phenomenological study of doctoral students in the Philippines found that participants frequently used prioritized task lists, evening research schedules, extended working hours, multitasking, and self-imposed time frames to accommodate doctoral research alongside employment and family responsibilities. The researchers characterized time as a scarce but carefully managed resource.

Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) similarly found that time management was one of the central challenges confronting working Filipino graduate students and that successful participants relied on personal



organizational strategies to manage competing obligations. More broadly, research on working university students has found that temporal boundary strategies are particularly important in achieving work–study balance and improving academic satisfaction.

The burden associated with overlapping responsibilities is also supported internationally. Derous and Ryan (2008) found that excessive time engagement in employment could interfere with study and that work–study interference affected students’ well-being. A 2025 Australian study involving 253 working university students similarly found that work–study conflict contributed significantly to poor health and academic difficulties, while high academic demands and insufficient time for academic work because of employment were important stressors.

The interpretation arising from this theme is therefore particularly important: time management competence should not be confused with unlimited coping capacity. A student may be disciplined, organized, and highly motivated while still experiencing fatigue because the combined volume of professional and academic demands exceeds available time and energy.

Accordingly, graduate institutions should avoid interpreting missed deadlines or academic strain automatically as evidence of poor individual discipline. Time management is partly personal, but it is also shaped by assignment loads, scheduling systems, course structures, workplace expectations, and family demands. The theme positions time as both an individual management concern and an institutional design consideration.

Theme 3: Learning After Working Hours, When Pedagogy Meets Adult Reality

The third theme focuses on participants’ experiences of graduate pedagogy after completing demanding professional responsibilities. Graduate students who are employed enter classrooms not as inexperienced learners but as adults carrying substantial professional knowledge, practical experiences, established responsibilities, and clear reasons for pursuing further education.

Participants may particularly appreciate teaching practices that maintain academic rigor while recognizing their professional realities.

One participant may state:

Participant 3: “I appreciate professors who give challenging activities but explain clearly what they expect from us. Because we are working, it helps when requirements are announced early so that we can prepare and manage our schedules.”

Another participant may emphasize relevance:

Participant 6: “I learn more when the professor connects the lesson with actual situations in our workplace. When I can relate the theory to something I have experienced, I understand the topic more deeply.”

A further participant may distinguish responsiveness from lowering standards:

Participant 10: “We are not asking professors to make graduate school easy. We know that graduate study should be challenging. What helps is when the activities are meaningful and when professors understand that most of us also have professional responsibilities.”

These responses suggest that participants value clarity, relevance, meaningful learning activities, constructive feedback, appropriate flexibility, and recognition of adult learners’ experiences. Importantly,



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they do not necessarily request reduced expectations. Rather, they appear to seek pedagogical practices in which academic demands have clearly articulated purposes and meaningful connections with graduate-level learning.

This interpretation strongly reflects Knowles' andragogical perspective, which views adult learners as self-directed individuals whose accumulated experiences form an important learning resource. Adult learners are generally more engaged when learning is relevant to their immediate problems, roles, and professional goals.

Recent empirical studies reinforce this position. Daga's 2026 research on graduate learners in a Philippine state university found that adult learners perceived graduate instruction as effective when it was interactive, collaborative, and oriented toward higher-order thinking, including multidisciplinary approaches and brainstorming. A separate 2026 qualitative study examining graduate learners' perceptions of andragogical practices likewise highlighted adult-learning approaches that promoted engagement, professional growth, and meaningful learning.

Philippine research on graduate education also illustrates the importance of modality and pedagogical responsiveness. A study at the University of the Philippines Asian Center noted that many graduate students were working professionals and that online-dominant learning remained useful partly because it helped them manage increasing workplace, household, and commuting pressures. The study emphasized student-centered pedagogy designed to develop learner agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking.

Research on working students also indicates that difficulties adapting to learning methods, understanding assessment requirements, obtaining learning resources, and receiving inadequate lecturer support can function as academic stressors.

The theme therefore supports the concept of responsive rigor. Flexibility and academic rigor should not be treated as opposites. A rigorous graduate program can remain demanding while providing clear expectations, advance scheduling, meaningful tasks, appropriate feedback, and opportunities for professional application. In fact, eliminating unnecessary ambiguity can allow students to devote more intellectual energy to meaningful learning.

The pedagogical implication is that the most effective graduate instruction for working professionals may not necessarily involve less work, but rather more purposeful work.

Theme 4: The Workplace Becomes a Classroom, and the Classroom Returns to Work

The fourth theme reveals a potentially productive relationship between professional employment and graduate education. While employment creates time constraints, professional experience may simultaneously enrich graduate learning. Participants can bring authentic workplace problems into classroom discussions and, conversely, apply theories, strategies, and research skills acquired in graduate school to their professional practice.

One participant may describe this reciprocal relationship:

Participant 1: "There are lessons that I understand immediately because I have already experienced similar situations at work. My experience gives me examples that help me understand the theories."

Another may explain how academic learning influences professional practice:

Participant 8: "There are concepts that I learned in graduate school that changed how I approach my work."



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Sometimes I realize that there is actually a theory behind something we have been doing in practice.”

A third participant may emphasize reflection:

Participant 11: “Graduate school makes me reflect more on my professional practices. Before, I might do something because it was the usual practice, but now I ask why we do it and whether there is a better approach.”

These accounts demonstrate a bidirectional learning process. Professional experience becomes raw material for interpreting graduate-level concepts, while academic knowledge provides conceptual frameworks through which participants can reconsider professional practices.

This finding is consistent with experiential and adult-learning perspectives. Knowles’ theory emphasizes that adults bring accumulated experiences that should be incorporated into the learning process. Working graduate students are consequently positioned not merely as recipients of academic information but as professionals capable of contributing authentic experiences to collective learning.

Recent empirical research supports this integration. Epp and Kaul (2026) examined work-based learning designed specifically for online working adult learners and emphasized the value of embedding applied, experiential assignments that connect academic learning with professional environments. A 2026 mixed-method study of postgraduate experiential learning similarly reported that experiential approaches contributed to professional skills and competencies among postgraduate students, underscoring the value of connecting graduate curricula with authentic professional experiences.

The interpretation extends beyond practical application. When professional experiences are deliberately reflected upon through theoretical perspectives, workplace experience becomes a source of academic inquiry rather than merely anecdotal evidence. Likewise, graduate learning becomes professionally consequential rather than remaining confined to classroom assessment.

This theme therefore represents one of the potential strengths of educating working professionals. Although employment may reduce available study time, it simultaneously provides rich experiential contexts through which theoretical ideas can be tested, questioned, contextualized, and applied.

For graduate educators, this means that classroom activities can capitalize on learners’ professional expertise through case analysis, workplace-based research, problem-solving activities, reflective writing, action research, collaborative inquiry, and authentic professional projects. In this way, the workplace becomes an extension of the graduate classroom, while the classroom becomes a space for critically re-examining workplace practice.

Theme 5: Persistence Is Personal, but Success Is Shared

The final theme reflects the recognition that completing graduate education while employed requires considerable personal determination, but persistence rarely occurs entirely through individual effort. Participants may identify spouses, children, relatives, classmates, colleagues, employers, supervisors, and professors as essential sources of encouragement, flexibility, practical assistance, and emotional support.

One participant may describe family support:

Participant 4: “My family understands when I need time to study or attend class. Sometimes they adjust their own schedules so that I can finish my requirements. Without that understanding, graduate school would be much more difficult.”



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Another participant may highlight peer solidarity:

Participant 5: “My classmates are important because most of us are also working. We understand each other's situation. If someone misses something because of work, we help one another and share information.”

A participant may also emphasize faculty support:

Participant 9: “A supportive professor motivates you to continue. It does not mean that the professor lowers the standards, but when you know that your professor is willing to guide you and answer questions, the pressure becomes easier to manage.”

Workplace consideration may further contribute:

Participant 12: “My supervisor knows that I am studying, so when possible, I am allowed to adjust my schedule for important academic activities. That kind of support is very important because sometimes work and school requirements happen at the same time.”

These responses reveal several interconnected support systems: family understanding, peer solidarity, faculty guidance, workplace consideration, and personal motivation. Each support system appears to preserve a different resource. Family members may provide emotional and practical support; classmates provide academic and social solidarity; professors provide intellectual guidance; and employers may provide schedule flexibility.

Agbayani and Paglinawan's (2025) Philippine phenomenological research provides strong support for this theme. They found that successful working graduate students relied not only on personal organizational strategies but also on external support systems while navigating competing academic and professional responsibilities.

Recent Philippine research involving doctoral students similarly identified professional networks as an important source of support in managing doctoral study, employment, research, and personal responsibilities. Another 2026 Philippine phenomenological study involving working students in Pampanga found that participants relied on family, friends, instructors, prioritization, discipline, and personal determination while facing time-management difficulties, fatigue, financial pressures, and limited preparation time.

International evidence also emphasizes the importance of the work environment. Research on students' work–study boundaries found that low workplace flexibility was associated with greater work–study conflict, higher demands, and poorer well-being. A 2025 study of working university students similarly recommended flexible learning structures and stronger workplace support because work–study conflict affected health, well-being, and academic outcomes.

Emerging research on working adults in graduate education further suggests that persistence is strengthened when self-regulation is supported by institutional structures such as individualized programs, regular advising, progress monitoring, and sustained faculty engagement.

The interpretation of this theme therefore challenges the assumption that graduate persistence is simply a product of determination. Personal resilience matters, but resilience operates within a social and institutional ecology of support. A highly motivated learner may still encounter significant barriers when family demands, unsupportive workplaces, rigid institutional systems, or limited faculty guidance converge.



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Graduate success should therefore be understood as both personal and relational. The participant completes the assignments, attends classes, conducts research, and ultimately earns the degree, but numerous relationships often make that persistence possible.

Taken together, the five themes reveal an experience characterized by continuous negotiation rather than perfect balance. Working graduate students move repeatedly across professional, academic, and personal roles. They protect limited time, reorganize schedules, sacrifice leisure, draw upon professional experience, seek relevant pedagogical encounters, and depend upon networks of support. Their persistence reflects determination, but it is also profoundly influenced by the environments in which they work and learn.

The thematic relationship may be represented as:

Dual Professional–Student Roles → Competing Demands → Time and Boundary Negotiation → Responsive Graduate Pedagogy → Integration of Work and Learning → Social and Institutional Support → Persistence and Professional Growth

The findings support Boundary Theory by demonstrating that participants continually negotiate the boundaries separating work, school, and personal life. They also reinforce Knowles' Adult Learning Theory because participants appear to value learning that recognizes their professional experience, provides practical relevance, encourages self-direction, and connects academic knowledge with workplace concerns.

Most importantly, the themes suggest that working graduate students should not be viewed merely as students who happen to have jobs. They are adult professionals whose work, education, family responsibilities, identities, and aspirations interact continuously. Graduate education becomes more responsive when institutions acknowledge this complexity while preserving scholarly expectations.

The implications for Isabela Colleges, Incorporated are therefore substantial. Support for working graduate students may include predictable academic calendars, advance communication of major requirements, responsive scheduling, meaningful and professionally relevant assessments, accessible academic advising, research mentoring, peer-support mechanisms, and pedagogical flexibility that does not compromise academic standards. These mechanisms shift institutional thinking away from asking only, "How can students manage their time better?" toward the equally important question, "How can graduate education be designed so that academically rigorous learning is realistically achievable for working adult professionals?"

Discussion

The proposed themes position the working graduate student's experience as a continuous process of role negotiation rather than perfect balance. Employment, academic study, and personal responsibilities do not necessarily occupy neatly separated periods. Instead, learners continually redistribute limited time and energy according to changing priorities.

The emphasis on time supports existing Philippine research identifying time management as a central challenge among working students. However, the present study extends this discussion by linking time directly with pedagogy. The issue is not only whether students can organize their schedules but whether graduate learning environments are intentionally designed for adult professionals.

The anticipated interaction between workplace experience and academic learning strongly reflects



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andragogical principles. Working graduate students possess professional knowledge that can enrich classroom discussions, case analysis, research, and collaborative activities. Graduate instructors can therefore treat professional experience as an intellectual resource.

At the same time, institutional responsibility should not be overlooked. Recent research challenges approaches that frame work–study difficulties entirely as failures of personal time management or resilience. A working student may be highly disciplined and still struggle when professional deadlines, rigid academic schedules, family obligations, and multiple course requirements converge.

Graduate education designed for working professionals should consequently pursue responsive rigor: maintaining scholarly expectations while employing pedagogical structures sensitive to adult learners' realities.

Implications for Graduate Education

The study has implications for graduate-school administrators and faculty members. First, course planning should recognize that many graduate students are employed professionals. Clear course calendars, advance notice of major requirements, purposeful scheduling, and predictable deadlines can help learners coordinate professional and academic responsibilities.

Second, faculty members may strengthen graduate pedagogy by connecting theoretical concepts with authentic professional situations. Case-based learning, reflective practice, workplace-related research, collaborative problem solving, and professional applications can capitalize on students' accumulated experience.

Third, graduate institutions can strengthen support through academic advising, research mentoring, peer-support mechanisms, accessible learning resources, and appropriate scheduling options.

Finally, institutional support should not be understood as lowering standards. Rather, the objective should be to create conditions in which working graduate students can meet rigorous standards without requiring unnecessary conflicts between academic and professional responsibilities.

Conclusion

The experience of working while pursuing graduate education represents far more than a scheduling challenge. It involves continually negotiating professional identity, academic aspirations, personal responsibilities, limited time, and expectations for advanced learning. Working graduate students demonstrate persistence by organizing schedules, establishing priorities, sacrificing personal time, seeking support, and connecting their professional experiences with graduate learning.

This study positions pedagogy at the center of this experience. For working professionals, meaningful graduate education is not defined solely by the quantity of academic requirements but by the intellectual relevance, professional applicability, clarity, rigor, and responsiveness of learning experiences.

Ultimately, balancing work and graduate study may never represent a perfectly stable condition. Instead, it is an ongoing process of adjustment and negotiation. Graduate institutions can contribute significantly to that process by creating learning environments in which professional experience is valued, time is respected, academic rigor is preserved, and working learners are supported as adult scholars and professionals.



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