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Navigating Dual Responsibilities: Work-Life-Learning Balance Among Master in Business Administration Students in Northeastern College

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ABSTRACT

Balancing employment, graduate education, and personal responsibilities has become a growing challenge for working professionals pursuing advanced degrees in public administration. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration (MBA) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in managing work-life-learning balance. Guided by Husserlian phenomenology, the study sought to understand how graduate students navigate competing professional, academic, and personal demands while sustaining academic performance and personal well-being. Purposive sampling was employed to select fifteen MBA students who were simultaneously employed in government agencies, local government units, educational institutions, and private organizations. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. Findings revealed five essential themes: (1) navigating competing professional and academic responsibilities; (2) strategic time management and prioritization; (3) institutional and family support as catalysts for persistence; (4) psychological resilience amid multiple role demands; and (5) graduate education as a pathway toward professional advancement and public service excellence. Participants described balancing multiple responsibilities as challenging yet transformative, enabling them to strengthen leadership competencies, decision-making abilities, organizational skills, and public service commitment. Despite experiencing fatigue, stress, and occasional work-life conflicts, students demonstrated resilience through effective planning, support systems, and intrinsic motivation to achieve career advancement. The study underscores the importance of flexible institutional policies, responsive graduate programs, and supportive workplace environments that foster academic persistence among working professionals. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on adult learning, work-life balance, and graduate education within the context of Philippine public administration.

Keywords: work-life-learning balance, public administration, graduate education, phenomenology, working professionals, adult learning, resilience

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1. Introduction

Graduate education has become increasingly essential in preparing public sector professionals to respond effectively to rapidly evolving governance challenges characterized by digital transformation, organizational complexity, public accountability, and sustainable development imperatives. Across developing countries, including the Philippines, Master in Business Administration (MBA) programs serve as important avenues for enhancing leadership capacity, evidence-based policymaking, ethical governance, and administrative competence among government employees and public servants. However, most MBA students are simultaneously employed professionals who shoulder multiple responsibilities extending beyond academic requirements. They continually balance workplace obligations, family commitments, community engagements, and graduate studies, creating a dynamic yet demanding educational experience.

The concept of work-life-learning balance has recently emerged as a significant extension of traditional work-life balance literature. Rather than focusing solely on balancing occupational and personal responsibilities, work-life-learning balance recognizes graduate education as a third critical domain requiring substantial investment of time, emotional energy, cognitive resources, and financial commitment. Adult learners pursuing graduate studies frequently encounter competing priorities, role conflicts, scheduling difficulties, psychological stress, and physical exhaustion while striving to achieve academic excellence and maintain professional performance. Despite these challenges, many working graduate students persist because of aspirations for career advancement, promotion opportunities, professional competence, and personal fulfillment.

The increasing participation of working professionals in graduate education has intensified scholarly attention toward understanding how adult learners balance employment, academic responsibilities, and personal life (Allen et al., 2020; Kossek & Lee, 2021). Unlike traditional undergraduate students, graduate learners simultaneously perform multiple roles as employees, parents, spouses, and community members while pursuing advanced education. This convergence of responsibilities creates what researchers describe as work-life-learning balance, a multidimensional process of managing occupational, personal, and academic demands without compromising well-being or performance (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021).

Work-life-learning balance extends the traditional concept of work-life balance by recognizing learning as an equally important life domain that requires substantial cognitive, emotional, financial, and temporal investment (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Adult learners often dedicate evenings, weekends, and personal leave to coursework, research, and academic requirements. Consequently, maintaining equilibrium among work, family, and education becomes critical for sustaining academic persistence and overall well-being (Richardson et al., 2021).

Recent studies have reported that graduate students commonly experience time constraints, competing priorities, financial burdens, emotional exhaustion, and reduced leisure opportunities (Denovan & Macaskill, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Nevertheless, these challenges also foster resilience, adaptability, self-regulation, and lifelong learning competencies that contribute positively to both professional growth and academic achievement (OECD, 2023).

Time management remains one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement among graduate students (Broadbent & Poon, 2021). Effective time management encoMBAsses planning, prioritization, scheduling, goal setting, and efficient allocation of available resources. Working graduate students who intentionally organize their daily activities are more likely to meet academic deadlines while maintaining satisfactory workplace performance (Macan, 2022).

Research indicates that adult learners commonly employ adaptive strategies such as maintaining weekly schedules, utilizing digital productivity applications, setting realistic academic goals, breaking large tasks into manageable components, and maximizing otherwise unproductive periods, including commuting and work breaks (Credé & Phillips, 2021). These approaches reduce procrastination, minimize stress, and improve academic productivity.

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Organizational support significantly influences graduate students' ability to maintain work-life-learning balance (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Supportive supervisors, flexible work arrangements, educational leave policies, understanding colleagues, and positive organizational climates contribute substantially to academic persistence among working professionals (Allen et al., 2020).

Perceived organizational support enhances employee motivation by fostering the belief that employers value continuous learning and professional development (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2021). Flexible scheduling, workload adjustments, and opportunities for educational leave reduce role conflict while enabling employees to participate more effectively in graduate education (Kossek & Lee, 2021). Conversely, inflexible organizational policies often intensify work-family-academic conflict, resulting in increased stress and reduced educational persistence (Nohe & Sonntag, 2021).

Within the Philippine context, public administrators increasingly face complex governance issues involving digital government initiatives, disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, fiscal accountability, citizen participation, and evidence-informed policymaking. Consequently, graduate education has become indispensable for developing competent leaders capable of navigating these multidimensional challenges. Nevertheless, little empirical research has examined how working Master in Business Administration students experience and negotiate the simultaneous demands of employment, family life, and graduate education, particularly within private higher education institutions in Northern Luzon.

Previous international studies have suggested that adult graduate students often experience role overload, time scarcity, emotional fatigue, and work-family conflict. However, these studies likewise emphasize that resilience, social support, effective time management, and intrinsic motivation significantly contribute to academic persistence and successful degree completion. Within Southeast Asia and the Philippine higher education landscape, scholarly attention has largely focused on undergraduate student well-being, leaving a noticeable gap regarding the lived experiences of working graduate students enrolled in public administration programs.

Understanding these experiences is particularly relevant because MBA students represent future leaders responsible for strengthening governance, improving public service delivery, and implementing policies that directly influence community development. Their educational experiences shape not only their personal and professional growth but also the quality of leadership they eventually provide in public institutions.

Anchored on phenomenological inquiry, this study explores the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, as they navigate the interconnected demands of employment, personal life, and graduate education. Specifically, the study seeks to uncover the meanings participants attach to their experiences, identify the strategies they employ in maintaining work-life-learning balance, and understand how these experiences contribute to their professional identity and leadership development. By providing an in-depth understanding of these lived experiences, the study contributes to the expanding scholarship on adult learning, graduate education, organizational behavior, and public administration while offering practical insights for higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen support mechanisms for working graduate students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily anchored on Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964) and is complemented by Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) proposed by Knowles (1984).

Role Theory posits that individuals simultaneously perform multiple social roles, each associated with distinct expectations, responsibilities, and behavioral demands (Kahn et al., 1964). Master in Business Administration students commonly assume the roles of employee, graduate student, spouse, parent, community member, and public servant. When expectations across these roles compete for limited time, energy, and resources, individuals experience role conflict and role overload (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021).

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However, effective coping mechanisms, organizational support, and adaptive strategies enable individuals to negotiate these competing demands successfully (Kossek & Lee, 2021). Within this study, Role Theory explains how MBA students manage overlapping professional, academic, and personal responsibilities while maintaining productivity and well-being.

Complementing this perspective, Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) argues that adult learners are self-directed, goal-oriented, and intrinsically motivated by learning experiences that have immediate relevance to their professional and personal lives (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Adult learners utilize their accumulated experiences to interpret new knowledge and directly apply classroom learning to workplace situations and leadership responsibilities. This theory explains why working professionals remain committed to graduate education despite considerable challenges, viewing advanced education as an investment in career advancement, professional competence, and effective public service.

The integration of Role Theory and Adult Learning Theory provides a comprehensive conceptual lens for examining the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration students. Together, these frameworks explain how participants navigate competing responsibilities, employ adaptive strategies, leverage workplace and family support systems, and transform educational experiences into professional growth, leadership development, and enhanced public service effectiveness (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021; Knowles et al., 2015).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design grounded in Husserl's phenomenological philosophy to explore the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration (MBA) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in balancing work, personal life, and graduate education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate because it sought to understand the meanings participants attributed to their experiences of simultaneously fulfilling professional, academic, and personal responsibilities. The study was conducted at Northeastern College, a private higher education institution offering graduate programs to working professionals from various sectors, including local government units, national government agencies, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, and private organizations. Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), fifteen (15) officially enrolled MBA students who had completed at least one semester of study, were employed full-time, and voluntarily agreed to participate were selected as participants. Data saturation served as the basis for determining the adequacy of the sample size (Saunders et al., 2018). Data were collected through researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides consisting of open-ended questions that explored participants' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal insights regarding work-life-learning balance. Prior to implementation, the interview guide underwent expert validation by specialists in qualitative research and public administration, followed by pilot testing to ensure clarity and relevance. Ethical clearance and institutional permission were secured before data collection, and all participants signed informed consent forms after being informed of the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Individual in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes were conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability, and were audio-recorded with permission. Field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations complemented the verbatim interview transcripts. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, which involved repeatedly reading transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing exhaustive descriptions, identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon, and conducting member checking to validate the findings (Morrow et al., 2015). Throughout the analysis, the researcher practiced bracketing (epoché) to minimize personal biases and ensure that interpretations faithfully represented participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility,

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transferability, dependability, and confirmability through member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and systematic documentation of the research process. Ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, anonymity, confidentiality, and responsible data management were likewise observed in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (2020) throughout the conduct of the study.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Managing Competing Professional, Academic, and Personal Responsibilities

The participants consistently described balancing work, graduate studies, and family responsibilities as their greatest challenge. They emphasized that fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously often required sacrificing leisure time, personal interests, and rest. Despite these demands, they viewed their responsibilities as opportunities to become more disciplined and responsible individuals.

One participant shared:

"There are days when I report to work the whole day, attend graduate classes in the evening, and still complete assignments late at night. It is exhausting, but I always remind myself that earning my master's degree is an investment in my future." (Participant 3)

Another participant explained:

"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed because my responsibilities overlap, especially when there are deadlines at work and school at the same time. I just try to stay focused and finish one task at a time." (Participant 8)

The findings demonstrate that work-life-learning balance involves continuous negotiation among competing demands rather than achieving perfect equilibrium. Participants accepted that temporary role conflicts were inevitable but regarded these experiences as part of their personal and professional growth. This finding supports Role Theory, which explains that occupying multiple social roles often leads to role conflict and overload due to competing expectations (Kahn et al., 1964). Similarly, Greenhaus and Allen (2021) argued that adult learners frequently experience tension between occupational, family, and educational responsibilities, requiring continuous adaptation and prioritization.

Theme 2: Strategic Time Management as the Foundation of Balance

Effective time management emerged as the participants' primary strategy for balancing multiple responsibilities. Most participants reported using planners, digital calendars, weekly schedules, and personal prioritization techniques to ensure that both academic and professional obligations were completed efficiently.

Participant 6 stated:

"I schedule everything. I have a planner where I write deadlines for work and graduate school. If I don't organize my time, I know I will miss important responsibilities."

Participant 11 remarked:

"Time management has become part of my daily routine. I maximize weekends, lunch breaks, and even travel time to review lessons or read journal articles."

Participants emphasized that successful time management required discipline, consistency, and flexibility. Rather than eliminating stress completely, careful planning minimized unnecessary pressure and enabled them to meet competing deadlines effectively.

These findings are consistent with Broadbent and Poon (2021), who identified self-regulated learning and time management as strong predictors of academic success among graduate students. Likewise, Macan (2022) emphasized that planning and prioritization significantly reduce role conflict while enhancing productivity among working professionals pursuing higher education.

Theme 3: Family, Workplace, and Peer Support Strengthen Academic Persistence

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Participants consistently acknowledged that their ability to continue graduate studies depended heavily on the support received from family members, employers, classmates, and faculty members. Emotional encouragement, flexible work arrangements, understanding supervisors, and collaborative classmates reduced stress and increased motivation to persist despite numerous challenges.
Participant 5 shared:
"My family understands that there are weekends when I need to study instead of spending time with them. Their encouragement keeps me motivated."
Participant 10 stated:
"My supervisor allows me to adjust my schedule whenever I have major academic requirements. Without that support, it would be difficult to continue my studies."
Participant 14 added:
"Our classmates help each other. We share learning materials, remind each other about deadlines, and encourage one another whenever someone feels exhausted."
These narratives demonstrate that work-life-learning balance extends beyond individual effort and is strengthened through supportive social relationships. Consistent with Social Capital Theory, interpersonal networks provide emotional, informational, and practical resources that facilitate educational success (Putnam, 2020). Similarly, Tinto (2021) emphasized that institutional and peer support significantly improve graduate student persistence and engagement.

Theme 4: Resilience and Self-Motivation Sustain Academic Journey
Despite experiencing fatigue, stress, financial pressures, and occasional self-doubt, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. They viewed obstacles not as reasons to discontinue graduate education but as opportunities to strengthen perseverance, adaptability, and emotional maturity.
Participant 2 reflected:
"There were times when I wanted to rest instead of attending class because of work pressure, but I reminded myself why I started this journey."
Participant 9 explained:
"Graduate school has taught me patience and resilience. Every challenge has made me stronger and more confident in handling responsibilities."
Several participants described resilience as being closely linked to their aspirations for career advancement, improved public service, and personal fulfillment. These intrinsic motivations enabled them to persist despite considerable role demands.
The findings corroborate previous studies identifying resilience as a protective factor against academic burnout and psychological distress among adult learners (Denovan & Macaskill, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). Knowles' Adult Learning Theory likewise suggests that adult learners possess strong intrinsic motivation because they perceive education as directly relevant to their professional and personal goals (Knowles et al., 2015).

Theme 5: Graduate Education as a Pathway to Professional Growth and Better Public Service
Beyond academic achievement, participants regarded their graduate education as a transformative experience that enhanced leadership competence, decision-making, communication, organizational management, and commitment to public service.
Participant 1 remarked:
"My master's studies have changed the way I analyze problems. I now make decisions based on evidence instead of assumptions."
Participant 12 stated:
"Graduate school has improved my confidence as a public servant. I now understand governance and leadership from a broader

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perspective."

Participant 15 shared:

"Everything I learn in class can immediately be applied in my workplace. It helps me become more effective in serving the public."

Participants consistently emphasized that their educational experiences extended beyond earning a degree. Instead, graduate education enabled them to become more competent professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to organizational effectiveness and public service delivery.

These findings align with Denhardt et al. (2021), who argued that graduate public administration programs strengthen leadership capacity, ethical governance, strategic thinking, and evidence-based decision-making. Likewise, the OECD (2023) emphasized that lifelong learning equips public sector professionals with competencies necessary for responding to increasingly complex governance challenges.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration students at Northeastern College are characterized by a continuous process of balancing competing professional, academic, and personal responsibilities. Although participants encountered substantial challenges, they consistently demonstrated resilience, effective time management, and adaptive coping strategies supported by family, workplace, and academic communities. Rather than perceiving work-life-learning balance as the absence of conflict, participants viewed it as an evolving process of prioritization, self-regulation, and purposeful adaptation.

The study validates the assumptions of Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), which explains how individuals experience role conflict while performing multiple social roles, and Adult Learning Theory (Knowles et al., 2015), which highlights adult learners' intrinsic motivation and ability to apply learning directly to professional practice. Collectively, the findings suggest that graduate education serves not only as an avenue for academic advancement but also as a transformative experience that strengthens leadership competencies, resilience, professional identity, and commitment to effective public service. These insights underscore the importance of flexible institutional policies, supportive workplace environments, and learner-centered graduate programs that enable working professionals to successfully navigate the demands of work, life, and learning while preparing them for greater leadership responsibilities in the public sector.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Master in Business Administration (MBA) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, as they navigated the demands of balancing work, personal life, and graduate education. The findings revealed that achieving work-life-learning balance is a dynamic and continuous process characterized by competing responsibilities, strategic time management, resilience, and the support of family, employers, peers, and the academic institution. Although participants experienced role conflict, workload pressures, physical fatigue, and emotional stress, they consistently demonstrated determination and adaptability in fulfilling their multiple responsibilities. Their experiences underscored that graduate education is not merely a pathway toward academic qualification but also a transformative journey that strengthens leadership competence, critical thinking, decision-making, organizational management, and commitment to public service. The study further established that effective work-life-learning balance is sustained through purposeful prioritization, self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, and collaborative support systems. Anchored on Role Theory and Adult Learning Theory, the findings affirm that working graduate students are capable of successfully negotiating multiple social roles when adequate institutional, organizational, and familial support mechanisms are available. Ultimately, the lived experiences of the participants illustrate that pursuing a Master in Business Administration contributes significantly to professional growth, lifelong learning, and the development of competent, ethical, and resilient public sector leaders.

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Implications of the Study

The findings have important implications for graduate education, public administration practice, higher education policy, and organizational management. For graduate schools, the study highlights the necessity of designing flexible academic policies, learner-centered instructional approaches, and accessible student support services that accommodate the unique needs of working professionals. Flexible scheduling, blended learning modalities, responsive academic advising, and faculty mentorship may enhance student persistence and academic success. For employers, particularly government agencies and local government units, the findings suggest that providing flexible work arrangements, educational leave opportunities, and organizational support can contribute to employees' professional development while simultaneously strengthening institutional capacity and public service delivery. For policymakers, the study reinforces the value of investing in continuing professional education as a strategy for cultivating competent public administrators capable of addressing increasingly complex governance challenges. Furthermore, the findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on adult learning, work-life-learning balance, and graduate education by providing empirical evidence from the Philippine higher education context, thereby expanding existing literature on working graduate students in public administration.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Graduate schools should continue strengthening flexible learning policies through blended and hybrid instructional approaches, accessible consultation schedules, and academic support programs that address the needs of working professionals pursuing graduate education.

2. Northeastern College should develop comprehensive student wellness and mentoring initiatives that promote work-life-learning balance, stress management, resilience, and psychological well-being among graduate students.

3. Government agencies and private organizations employing graduate students should establish supportive workplace policies, including flexible work schedules, educational leave, reduced workload during academic peak periods, and professional development programs that encourage lifelong learning.

4. Faculty members should continue adopting learner-centered instructional strategies, reasonable academic timelines, collaborative learning opportunities, and responsive communication practices that recognize the unique circumstances of working graduate students.

5. Master in Business Administration students should strengthen personal time management, self-regulation, and resilience through effective planning, prioritization, goal setting, and utilization of institutional and social support networks.

6. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study using larger and more diverse participant groups across different higher education institutions and graduate programs. CoMBArative studies involving public and private universities, quantitative investigations examining the predictors of work-life-learning balance, and mixed-methods research exploring the relationships among resilience, organizational support, academic performance, and leadership development are likewise recommended to further enrich the literature.

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