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Article

Navigating the Dual Roles of Working and Graduate Studies: Time Management Experiences of Master of Public Administration Students at Northeastern College

Reyna Fe Pascual Roque
Northeastern College, Santiago City
roquereynafe19@gmail.com

Abstract

Balancing professional employment and graduate education has become increasingly challenging for working professionals pursuing advanced academic qualifications. For Master of Public Administration (MPA) students, the simultaneous demands of employment, academic responsibilities, and personal commitments require effective time management strategies to sustain academic achievement and professional performance. Despite growing scholarly attention to work–study balance, limited research has explored how graduate students in public administration navigate these competing responsibilities within the Philippine higher education context. This study explored the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration students in managing the dual roles of employment and graduate studies at Northeastern College. Guided by a phenomenological research design, the study sought to understand how working graduate students organize their time, cope with competing demands, and sustain learning while fulfilling professional obligations. Twelve (12) Master of Public Administration students who were employed full-time and enrolled in graduate studies were purposively selected as participants. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, validated through member checking, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. The findings revealed that effective time management extends beyond scheduling activities and involves continuous decision-making, self-regulation, and adaptive coping mechanisms that enable students to fulfill multiple responsibilities. The study underscores the importance of learner-centered graduate pedagogy, institutional flexibility, and support mechanisms that recognize the unique circumstances of working professionals pursuing advanced education.

Keywords: time management, graduate education, Master of Public Administration, work-study balance, phenomenology, qualitative research, higher education, working professionals

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1. Introduction

Graduate education has become an important avenue for career advancement, leadership development, and professional specialization among public sector employees. As governments and organizations continue to demand highly competent public administrators capable of addressing increasingly complex governance challenges, many professionals pursue graduate education while maintaining full-time employment. This dual commitment enables practitioners to acquire advanced theoretical knowledge while simultaneously applying newly developed competencies in professional settings. However, balancing employment responsibilities and graduate studies presents substantial challenges that often require sophisticated time management strategies, self-regulation, and resilience.

Time management has long been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement and professional effectiveness among adult learners. Graduate students who simultaneously fulfill occupational, academic, family, and community responsibilities frequently experience competing demands that require careful prioritization of limited time and resources. Unlike traditional full-time students, working graduate students continuously negotiate multiple roles, making effective time management an essential competency rather than merely a productivity technique. Inadequate management of these competing demands may result in academic stress, reduced work performance, diminished well-being, and delayed degree completion.

Within Master of Public Administration programs, the complexity of balancing professional practice and graduate learning becomes even more pronounced. Public administration students often occupy leadership, supervisory, or technical positions within government agencies, local government units, educational institutions, and non-government organizations. These roles require immediate decision-making, public accountability, and organizational responsiveness while simultaneously demanding rigorous academic engagement through research, policy analysis, collaborative learning, and scholarly writing. Consequently, graduate learning in public administration occurs within a dynamic environment where professional practice and academic development continually interact.

Contemporary higher education increasingly recognizes the value of flexible and learner-centered pedagogies that accommodate the realities of adult learners. Graduate institutions have adopted blended learning, flexible scheduling, collaborative learning environments, and technology-enhanced instruction to support working professionals. Nevertheless, institutional flexibility alone does not eliminate the challenges associated with managing multiple responsibilities. Individual experiences remain shaped by personal motivation, workplace expectations, family responsibilities, and social support systems, all of which influence students' capacity to sustain meaningful engagement in graduate education.

Existing literature has extensively examined work–life balance, academic stress, self-regulated learning, and adult education. Studies consistently report that effective time management contributes to higher academic performance, reduced stress, and improved psychological well-being. Similarly, self-regulated learners demonstrate greater persistence, adaptability, and

academic success despite competing demands. However, much of the existing evidence originates from undergraduate populations or general graduate student samples, providing limited understanding of the unique experiences of Master of Public Administration students who simultaneously navigate professional responsibilities within public service organizations.

In the Philippine context, empirical studies focusing specifically on the lived experiences of working Master of Public Administration students remain limited. Most available investigations emphasize quantitative measures of academic performance, stress, or work–life balance, while relatively few studies explore how graduate students construct meaning from their experiences of managing employment and higher education simultaneously. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for developing responsive graduate programs, learner-centered pedagogical practices, and institutional support systems that promote student success among working professionals.

Northeastern College Graduate School serves a diverse population of adult learners whose educational aspirations are closely connected to career advancement and public service. Many Master of Public Administration students maintain full-time employment while pursuing graduate studies, making the institution an appropriate context for examining how working professionals balance multiple responsibilities. Their experiences provide valuable insights into effective time management strategies, adaptive learning practices, and institutional conditions that facilitate persistence in graduate education.

Grounded in phenomenology, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration students as they navigate the dual roles of employment and graduate studies. Rather than measuring time management quantitatively, the study aims to understand the meanings participants attribute to balancing professional work and academic learning. The findings are expected to contribute to graduate education literature by informing learner-centered pedagogical practices, institutional policies, and support mechanisms that enhance the academic success and well-being of working graduate students.

Research Objectives

General Objective

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration students at Northeastern College in navigating the dual roles of full-time employment and graduate studies, with particular emphasis on their time management practices and their influence on learning and professional responsibilities.

Specific Objectives

Specifically, this study sought to:

1. Describe the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration students in balancing work and graduate studies.
2. Examine the time management strategies employed by working graduate students in managing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities.

3. Identify the challenges encountered by graduate students in maintaining work–study balance.
4. Explore the coping mechanisms and support systems that enable students to sustain academic engagement while fulfilling professional obligations.
5. Develop thematic insights that may inform learner-centered pedagogical practices and institutional support programs for working graduate students.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration (MPA) students in balancing full-time employment and graduate education, particularly their time management practices, challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal and professional development. Grounded in the phenomenological perspective of Moustakas (1994), the research emphasized understanding how individuals interpreted and assigned meaning to their experiences of managing competing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. The study was conducted at the Graduate School of Northeastern College, Philippines, which offered graduate programs designed to accommodate working professionals employed in government agencies, educational institutions, local government units, and private organizations. Twelve (12) Master of Public Administration students were purposively selected based on their enrollment in the MPA program, full-time employment status, completion of at least one academic semester, firsthand experience in balancing work and graduate studies, and voluntary willingness to participate. The selection of participants was consistent with the qualitative research principles discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018), which emphasize the richness and depth of participants' experiences rather than statistical representativeness. Data were collected through a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions that explored participants' work–study experiences, daily and weekly time management practices, academic and professional challenges, coping strategies, institutional and social support systems, and recommendations for improving graduate education among working professionals. The interview instrument underwent content validation by three experts specializing in qualitative research, public administration, and graduate education, and necessary revisions were incorporated to enhance its clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. Following approval from the Graduate School administration, participants were recruited through purposive sampling and provided with informed consent forms explaining the objectives, procedures, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of the study. Individual interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability and preferences. With their consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and contextual meanings of their responses. Member checking was subsequently undertaken by returning interview transcripts to participants for verification and clarification. The collected qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which involved six recursive phases: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, generation of initial codes,

construction of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of an analytical narrative integrating participants' accounts with relevant literature and theoretical perspectives. This analytical approach facilitated the identification and interpretation of meaningful patterns concerning the complexities of work–study balance, time management strategies, competing responsibilities, and the personal and institutional factors influencing graduate students' educational experiences. To establish methodological rigor, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with participants' narratives, member checking, and expert validation of the interview protocol, while transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and methodological procedures. Dependability was addressed through a systematic audit trail documenting research decisions, coding processes, and analytical developments, whereas confirmability was enhanced through researcher reflexivity, peer debriefing, and careful documentation of the interpretive process to ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' accounts. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the investigation, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, respect for participants' autonomy, and the protection of personal information. Participants were assigned pseudonymous identification codes (P1–P12) to safeguard their identities, and all audio recordings, interview transcripts, and research documents were securely maintained and used exclusively for academic purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Through these procedures, the research provided a systematic and contextually grounded exploration of how working graduate students navigated the demands of professional employment and advanced education, offering insights into the challenges, adaptive strategies, and support mechanisms associated with balancing multiple responsibilities.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis revealed four overarching themes that describe how Master of Public Administration students at Northeastern College navigate the dual responsibilities of full-time employment and graduate studies. This section presents the first two emergent themes supported by verbatim participant narratives and interpreted through existing literature and the study's theoretical framework.

Theme 1: Prioritizing Responsibilities Through Strategic Time Allocation

One of the most prominent findings of the study is that participants deliberately organized and prioritized their daily responsibilities to accommodate the simultaneous demands of work and graduate education. Time management was not perceived merely as scheduling activities but as a continuous process of making decisions, setting priorities, and allocating limited time according to urgency and importance.

Most participants explained that they relied on structured schedules, planners, digital calendars, and personal routines to maintain balance between academic requirements and workplace responsibilities. They recognized that effective planning minimized conflicts between deadlines and enabled them to remain productive in both environments.

Participant 3 shared:

"Every Sunday evening, I prepare my entire week's schedule. I list my office deadlines first, then identify available hours for reading, writing papers, and attending graduate classes. Without planning ahead, everything becomes overwhelming." (P3)

Similarly, Participant 8 stated:

"There are days when office work becomes very demanding. Instead of panicking, I adjust my study schedule by waking up earlier or studying during lunch breaks. Flexibility is very important." (P8)

Participant 11 emphasized:

"Graduate school taught me that every hour matters. I learned to avoid procrastination because postponing one task affects everything else." (P11)

These narratives demonstrate that participants viewed time as a valuable resource requiring intentional allocation. Rather than attempting to complete every task simultaneously, they strategically prioritized responsibilities based on urgency, deadlines, and long-term goals.

The findings support Zimmerman's (2002) Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which emphasizes that successful learners proactively plan, monitor, and regulate their behaviors to achieve academic goals. Participants consistently demonstrated self-regulation by anticipating future academic demands, adjusting schedules, and monitoring their progress throughout the semester.

Likewise, Macan (1994) argued that effective time management involves setting priorities, organizing tasks, and maintaining perceived control over one's schedule. The participants' experiences illustrate these principles through deliberate planning and adaptive scheduling practices.

From the perspective of Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1984), adult learners assume responsibility for directing their own learning based on personal and professional needs. The participants exhibited characteristics of self-directed learners by integrating workplace experiences into their academic planning while independently determining how to allocate time across multiple responsibilities.

These findings further indicate that strategic time allocation contributes not only to academic productivity but also to psychological well-being. By organizing responsibilities systematically, participants reduced unnecessary stress and developed confidence in managing competing obligations.

Overall, strategic prioritization emerged as a foundational competency enabling graduate students to sustain academic engagement without compromising professional performance.

Theme 2: Cultivating Self-Discipline and Adaptive Learning Routines

The second emergent theme highlights the importance of self-discipline and adaptive learning habits in sustaining graduate education while maintaining full-time employment.

Participants consistently emphasized that successful work–study balance required more than effective scheduling; it demanded strong personal discipline, consistency, and the willingness to modify learning routines according to changing professional circumstances.

Participant 2 explained:

"There are times when I feel exhausted after work, but I remind myself why I enrolled in graduate school. Even reading one journal article before sleeping keeps me moving toward my goal." (P2)

Participant 6 shared:

"My study habits changed after entering graduate school. Instead of waiting for long weekends, I study in small sessions every day because that's the only schedule I can consistently maintain." (P6)

Participant 10 added:

"Unexpected meetings and office assignments happen all the time. I learned to become flexible and immediately adjust my study routine instead of giving up." (P10)

These accounts reveal that participants developed adaptive learning routines characterized by persistence, consistency, and flexibility. Rather than depending on ideal study conditions, they continuously modified their learning behaviors to accommodate workplace demands while maintaining academic progress.

The findings strongly align with Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2002), which emphasizes learners' capacity to regulate motivation, learning strategies, and behaviors in response to changing circumstances. Participants demonstrated high levels of metacognitive awareness by evaluating their schedules, modifying study habits, and maintaining motivation despite fatigue and competing responsibilities.

The results also support Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), particularly the concept of self-efficacy. Participants who believed in their ability to overcome obstacles displayed greater persistence, stronger commitment to graduate education, and greater resilience when confronted with academic and professional challenges.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with Pintrich's (2004) framework of self-regulated learning, which highlights motivation, behavioral control, and strategic adaptation as essential factors influencing academic persistence. Participants continuously adjusted their learning strategies while sustaining intrinsic motivation to complete their graduate studies.

From a pedagogical perspective, these experiences underscore the importance of flexible graduate instruction that accommodates the realities of working professionals. Learner-centered instructional approaches, asynchronous learning opportunities, and scaffolded assessments enable adult learners to sustain academic engagement despite unpredictable workplace responsibilities.

The participants' narratives suggest that self-discipline is not an innate characteristic but a competency gradually strengthened through repeated experiences of balancing multiple

responsibilities. Over time, adaptive learning routines became integrated into their professional and academic lives, enabling them to maintain consistent progress toward degree completion.

Theme 3: Negotiating Workplace, Academic, and Personal Expectations

A recurring finding in the participants' narratives was the continuous negotiation among workplace obligations, academic requirements, and personal responsibilities. Participants described balancing these competing roles as one of the most demanding aspects of their graduate school journey. They acknowledged that effective time management was not solely about allocating time but also about making difficult decisions regarding priorities, sacrifices, and expectations.

Most participants shared that they frequently experienced conflicting deadlines between work and graduate studies. Professional responsibilities often required immediate attention, while academic tasks demanded sustained intellectual engagement. Consequently, participants learned to negotiate expectations with supervisors, instructors, colleagues, and family members to maintain equilibrium across their various roles.

Participant 1 explained:

"There are occasions when important meetings coincide with graduate class requirements. I learned to communicate early with my professors and supervisors so I could fulfill both responsibilities without compromising either one." (P1)

Participant 5 reflected:

"Graduate school required many personal sacrifices. I had to reduce social activities and dedicate weekends to research and assignments. Although challenging, I considered these sacrifices as investments for my future." (P5)

Participant 9 likewise stated:

"Balancing work and graduate school became easier when my family understood my schedule. Their support allowed me to concentrate on my academic responsibilities without feeling guilty." (P9)

These narratives illustrate that managing multiple responsibilities involves continuous negotiation rather than rigid adherence to predetermined schedules. Participants developed communication skills, flexibility, and realistic expectations that enabled them to navigate overlapping professional, academic, and personal commitments.

These findings are consistent with Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), which explains that individuals occupying multiple social roles often experience role conflict when competing expectations arise simultaneously. The participants' experiences demonstrate that successful management of multiple roles depends on effective communication, prioritization, and adaptability.

Similarly, Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) Work–Family Conflict Theory suggests that competing demands across work, family, and education create time-based and strain-based conflicts. The present findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that graduate students actively

negotiate these competing expectations rather than merely experiencing role conflict. Their ability to communicate, seek understanding, and make informed decisions enabled them to maintain both academic and professional performance.

The findings also reinforce Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1984), which emphasizes that adult learners integrate educational experiences with existing personal and professional responsibilities. Participants viewed graduate education not as a separate activity but as an extension of their professional growth and lifelong learning journey.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that graduate programs should recognize the complex realities of working professionals by implementing flexible instructional practices, reasonable deadlines, and supportive communication between faculty members and students. Such learner-centered approaches acknowledge the diverse circumstances that influence graduate students' academic engagement and success.

Theme 4: Fostering Resilience Through Institutional and Social Support Systems

The final theme highlights resilience as a critical outcome of effective time management, strengthened by institutional flexibility and strong social support networks. Participants consistently emphasized that their ability to sustain graduate education while maintaining full-time employment was not solely attributable to individual determination but was also reinforced by supportive relationships and responsive educational practices.

Participants described encouragement from family members, supervisors, classmates, and faculty members as essential sources of motivation during periods of academic pressure and professional stress. Institutional practices, including flexible class schedules, understanding instructors, and collaborative learning environments, likewise contributed to their persistence.

Participant 4 shared:

"Whenever I became overwhelmed with work, my classmates reminded me that we were all experiencing similar struggles. Their encouragement motivated me to continue despite the difficulties." (P4)

Participant 7 explained:

"Our professors understood that many of us were working professionals. Their flexibility and willingness to provide guidance helped us complete our academic requirements without unnecessary pressure." (P7)

Participant 12 reflected:

"My family became my greatest source of motivation. Their encouragement reminded me that earning my master's degree would benefit not only my career but also our future as a family." (P12)

These accounts demonstrate that resilience emerged through reciprocal interactions between individual effort and external support. Participants acknowledged that while personal discipline remained essential, institutional responsiveness and interpersonal encouragement strengthened their capacity to overcome challenges and sustain long-term academic commitment.

The findings align with Tinto's Theory of Student Persistence (1993), which posits that academic persistence is enhanced through meaningful academic and social integration. Participants who experienced supportive relationships with faculty members and peers demonstrated stronger commitment to completing their graduate studies despite competing work responsibilities.

The results likewise support Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), particularly the role of social support in strengthening self-efficacy. Positive feedback, collaborative learning, and encouragement from significant others enhanced participants' confidence in managing multiple responsibilities and achieving their educational goals.

Furthermore, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) explains that individuals adapt more effectively to life transitions when adequate support systems and coping resources are available. The participants' experiences illustrate how supportive institutional environments and interpersonal relationships contributed to successful adaptation throughout graduate education.

These findings underscore the importance of learner-centered graduate pedagogy that extends beyond classroom instruction. Flexible learning environments, accessible faculty mentorship, collaborative peer networks, and institutional support services collectively promote resilience and persistence among working graduate students.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Master of Public Administration students at Northeastern College as they navigated the dual roles of full-time employment and graduate studies. The findings revealed that balancing professional responsibilities and graduate education is a complex and dynamic process requiring effective time management, self-regulation, adaptability, and resilience. Rather than viewing time management as merely organizing schedules, participants described it as a deliberate process of prioritizing responsibilities, making informed decisions, negotiating competing expectations, and continuously adjusting to changing personal and professional circumstances.

The four emergent themes (1) Prioritizing Responsibilities Through Strategic Time Allocation, (2) Cultivating Self-Discipline and Adaptive Learning Routines, (3) Negotiating Workplace, Academic, and Personal Expectations, and (4) Fostering Resilience Through Institutional and Social Support Systems collectively demonstrate that successful work–study balance results from the interaction between personal competencies and supportive learning environments. Participants consistently emphasized that effective time management is strengthened by self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, flexible learning strategies, open communication, and meaningful support from family, peers, employers, and faculty members.

The study further highlights that learner-centered graduate pedagogy plays a crucial role in promoting student success among working professionals. Flexible instructional approaches, collaborative learning environments, responsive faculty practices, and institutional support systems enable graduate students to sustain academic engagement while fulfilling demanding professional obligations. These findings affirm that graduate education should recognize the unique realities of adult learners and adopt pedagogical practices that promote flexibility, inclusivity, and lifelong learning.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on graduate education, adult learning, and public administration by providing an in-depth understanding of how working graduate students experience and manage the demands of employment and advanced academic study. The findings offer practical insights for higher education institutions seeking to develop responsive graduate programs that enhance academic persistence, professional development, and student well-being.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Graduate Education

The findings emphasize the need for graduate schools to recognize the diverse responsibilities of working professionals. Graduate curricula and instructional practices should incorporate flexible learning modalities, balanced academic workloads, and learner-centered pedagogies that support students with multiple professional and personal commitments.

Implications for Faculty Members

Faculty members play a significant role in fostering graduate student success. Flexible scheduling, transparent communication, scaffolded assessments, timely feedback, and collaborative learning opportunities can enhance student engagement without compromising academic rigor.

Implications for Graduate Students

The study demonstrates that effective time management is a learned competency involving self-regulation, planning, prioritization, and adaptability. Graduate students may benefit from developing structured routines, realistic goal-setting practices, and reflective learning habits that promote long-term academic persistence.

Implications for Educational Leadership

Graduate school administrators may utilize the findings to strengthen institutional policies that promote academic flexibility, faculty mentoring, wellness initiatives, and student support services specifically designed for working professionals pursuing advanced degrees.

Implications for Public Administration Education

Given the demanding nature of public service professions, graduate programs in Public Administration should integrate leadership development, reflective practice, and professional learning experiences that acknowledge the realities of balancing governance responsibilities with academic advancement.

Recommendations

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

1. **Strengthen learner-centered graduate pedagogy** by adopting flexible instructional strategies such as blended learning, asynchronous learning activities, collaborative projects, and authentic assessments that accommodate the schedules of working professionals.

2. **Develop institutional time management and academic support programs** through seminars, mentoring initiatives, academic coaching, and orientation sessions focusing on work–study balance, self-regulated learning, and stress management.

3. **Enhance faculty development programs** by training instructors in adult learning principles, flexible assessment practices, inclusive graduate instruction, and responsive academic advising.

4. **Promote collaborative learning communities** that encourage peer mentoring, professional networking, and academic support among graduate students to strengthen persistence and resilience.

5. **Establish comprehensive student wellness initiatives** that address mental health, work-related stress, academic well-being, and life–study balance through counseling services and psychosocial support programs.

6. **Encourage workplace–university partnerships** that promote organizational support for graduate education through flexible work arrangements, educational leave, and professional development opportunities.

7. **Conduct further qualitative and mixed-methods studies** involving graduate students from various academic disciplines and higher education institutions to compare work–study experiences across diverse professional contexts.

8. **Develop institutional policies** that recognize the unique needs of working graduate students while maintaining academic excellence and ensuring equitable access to quality graduate education.

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