

You Cannot Be Perfect All the Time

Vance Johnson Lewis, Northeastern State University

Abstract

This article examines the paradoxical relationship between professional success and personal leisure in academia, particularly for educators who feel a strong responsibility toward their students. The author reflects on his journey as an academic and editor, drawing on three key points of advice which helped the author re-evaluate his professional boundaries. The article concludes with advice from the author encouraging all to take a balanced approach to success, one that prioritizes self-compassion and recognizes the importance of accepting limitations, thereby making room for both ambition and personal well-being. This perspective encourages a more sustainable and fulfilling academic career.

Keywords: Academic Career, Work-Life Balance, Professional Boundaries, Self-Compassion

- You Cannot Be Perfect All the Time

We now face the danger, which in the past has been the most destructive to the humans: Success, plenty, comfort and ever-increasing leisure. No dynamic people has ever survived these dangers.
--John Steinbeck, 1962

I wish that I could say when I first heard this quote from John Steinbeck that it was due to my intense study of literature and knowledge of the greatest writers; but I must confess, that I first heard this quote at the age of nine when proffered by an audio-animatronic Mark Twain quoting John Steinbeck during the stirring finale of *The American Adventure* at EPCOT Center at Walt Disney World. In researching the quote, I found that no one has actually been able to pinpoint when, or even if, John Steinbeck said it; however, it is the statement for which he is most often quoted. Regardless, its warning about the consequences of success has proven motivational for me during my career; however, as we would say in the social sciences, the correlation between success and leisure would seem to be an inverse one as it seems as our success increases, our leisure decreases, forming a different danger than Steinbeck warned.

Looking at the calendar, it is unfathomable that just three years ago, I was excitedly beginning my time as Editor of *Quarterly Review of Business Disciplines*...heck it seems like just yesterday I was eagerly waiting to find out if I had been selected Editor of my high school yearbook, which for the record, I was! Now as I am reflecting on this, my last issue as Editor of *QRBD*, I am thinking back over the past three years not just of being Editor of this journal, but also how I am reaching what is, unless otherwise disrupted, the midway point in my academic career. Over the past few weeks, the idea of my own success has been at the forefront of my thoughts and how I have had to force leisure to be a part of it.

Thirteen years have passed since my committee at Oklahoma State University said “congratulations Dr. Lewis” after which I have added a post-doctorate, earned tenure at a R3 university and gave it up, had a wild adventure as a visiting professor (Lewis, 2025), been appointed editor of two journals, served in multiple program director roles, and won six blue ribbons at the State Fair of Texas (but that is a different story). Always being one to take advice with a grain of salt, I have reflected on what kept me going and who it might have offered it. Truthfully, I would not know John Steinbeck even if Disney created a lifelike version that walked in front of me; however, I do remember the advice to which I contribute my ability to reach some level of success.

You can't save them all.
--Charles Hazzard, 2014

When I first started my career post-graduation, I took on the role of Program Director of Business Administration at The University of Texas at Dallas. Now, this position was not a research position and it was a non-tenure-track position...I can still hear Dean Hasan Pirkil saying “I did not hire you to do research”...but this position allowed me to do what I enjoyed most: working directly

with the students. While teaching my classes, which were primarily Organizational Behavior, Strategic Management and Capstones, I also was able to be the main point of contact for students in my degree program for more one-on-one matters. Of course, I can surmise that many readers of this can relate to those conversations with the students who are confused about what degree to pursue but I also had students for whom I was the only support being offered as there was none coming from home. At UTD, I had a lot of first-generation Americans who were trying to navigate finding success in the United States with expectations that were coming from the cultures of their parents, and certainly not North Texas. Of particular challenge was that I was the director of the “touchy feely” degree program at a school that was highly geared toward the quantitative arts such as information systems, data analytics, finance, and oh yes data analytics. While many students were spending hours in the computer lab, my Society for Human Resource Management students hosted a Super Mario Kart tournament...and we loved every minute of it. (We also won SHRM Chapter of the Year in 2016.)

I also had a lot of tears in that office. I had a student who did not know what to do about an unwanted pregnancy. Several students who had drug and alcohol problems who were looking for help. Veterans who were navigating the challenges of college life being 10 years older than their peers. At that time, in 2012 to 2014, we, as faculty members, were being called upon to be more vigilant about student mental health issues. As strange as it may sound, those were all things that I really enjoyed. Of course not that my students were suffering, but helping them find a solution for their challenges and being able to move forward.

In 2014, my first big success occurred when I had organized enough students to split from Business Administration and form a degree program in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources (in all transparency, the paperwork was not fully recognized by Texas until after my departure from UTD). This was a big deal but my success and happiness had an inverse correlation. During that summer, I began to notice that my own quality of life was going down. To begin, I had never lived in a place as big as Dallas, TX (my hometown of Fort Smith, AR, could fit inside AT&T Cowboys Stadium) and so adjusting to big city life along with being in my 30's was taking its toll. Past this, I started to wake up in the morning thinking “ugghhh....work.” (Plus, I had to commute from Downtown Dallas to Richardson on HWY 75 which was like a daily 35 minute Hail Mary.)

There was also the challenge of who my peers were. One of the hard facts about higher education is that it is rather isolating. We do not tend to socialize with one another and like it or not, most interactions I had during the day were with 19 to 21 year olds; thus, my students really became my life and I was putting all of my energies, both in and out of the classroom, into their success. Even though on the surface things were looking good, I felt like a failure and was growing increasingly frustrated with my career and it was showing.

And then one day, relief came. At UTD, we were blessed to have as our Executive in Residence, Charles Hazzard, who, among his many accomplishments, had been a labor relations manager for Ford Motor Company and Executive Vice President of OxyChem. Even better, he liked me and kept an eye out on how things were going for me. Out of the blue, Charlie, who was a rather imposing man, walked into my office and said “You can’t save them all” (and then a few words I

will leave lost to history). It was such an easy answer to why I was so frustrated. And that even though I was having a great deal of success, I was not happy and the reason was simple: success in my eyes was based solely on the success of others...sorry John Steinbeck but no leisure for me!

As true educators, I believe we want to help our students. Yes, there are people in our field who are there to get the research grants, to be editors of the top journals, write A* articles, or to be one of the “stars” at the conference. There are even those, and I will redact they who first made this statement to me, who treat their academic position as a part time job so they can run another business or do much more monetarily rewarding consulting. Now granted, I enjoy doing consulting too. But my primary job is that of a teacher and I teach for a living.

When we teach for a living, we are going to encounter some of the afore mentioned challenges. We are going to encounter the students for whom we eagerly arrive on campus every day to see because we know they are going to make it—I always joke on the first day of class that I want them to be successful so they can come back and take me out to lunch (my thirteen year investment has started to pay dividends!). And then there are the ones who keep us up at night and are the first thing on our minds when we wake up because we know they are on the edge and we know deep down that success is not going to come for them.

But those words “you can't save them all” was the key piece of advice that helped me keep going and redirect my career, because what it helped me realize was that I was expending an extraordinary amount of energy trying to save all of them. Trying to make sure they all got everything that they could out of my class. I was placing so much burden on myself that I was not being as effective as I could be. There were people in that classroom (UTD did not have online courses at this point) that if they passed great, if they got an “A” great, if they learned what a VRIO analysis was great...and if they did not great. And of course those who did not care one way or the other but I wanted to make sure that every single one of them got every single bit of information that I had to give on the topic for 16 weeks. Now for those who know me even casually, you will know that mathematical equations are not in my wheelhouse but since this is an interdisciplinary journal, here is the Lewis UTD Formula of Success:

*[4 class x 50 students] x [2 student groups] x program director =
eating entire bag off Oreos daily.*

And I looked upon it as though if they did not get an “A”, or if they were not showing as much excitement for the job or the topic as I was, I was somehow failing. “You can't save them all” was a piece of knowledge which allowed me to forgive myself a little bit. I am able to go into that classroom, and as long as I am giving my best, and as long as I am offering them all the opportunity to get the information, I cannot ask any more of myself and this is where I draw the line of where success ends and leisure begins.

*You can't be perfect all the time.
--Frank Carroll, 1997*

So now 13 years later, knowing I cannot save them all, probably saved my career. Reprioritizing my investment into my students alongside my investment in my success/leisure balance has empowered me to drive my career in the manner that works for me. Now hopefully anyone who may comment on my job performance will say that I always give it my all but I have allowed myself to back off, pursue other things both on and off campus. In our field, there are two bars which count as success: earning tenure and being promoted to full professor. In 2022, I earned that first badge of success at The University of Central Arkansas and even though it was a tough process, had I not previously learned how to prioritize myself along with my students, the process would have probably driven me insane. Past this, I would have not accomplished anything in the other two important aspects of academia: research and service. My student evaluations (a conversation on which the validity of and inherent bias in will be saved for another day) were most always high but I was also able to accomplish other things such as being elected to Faculty Senate my first year at the University, being named Editor of an ABDC list journal, and serving my community by being a police officer at Six Flags Over Texas and volunteering with Battlefields to Boardrooms. So just as Charlie offered me some career saving advice, as I move on from this current role, I wanted to offer some concluding remark that hopefully helps someone else over that hurdle they are facing.

In 1997, one of the greatest athletes of all time, Michelle Kwan, unexpectedly lost the United States National Figure Skating Championships after going splat on two jumps. While awaiting her fate in the infamous “Kiss and Cry” area, in front of a sold out Nashville, TN, crowd and millions watching on television (*US Figure Skating*, 1997), her coach Frank Carroll gently said “You can’t be perfect all the time” (Wilson, 1997). Such a simple and caring statement from a coach but one that embodied the pressure this 16 year old athletic prodigy put on herself and one in which those of us in the self-governed world of higher education, where the lines between work and life are often blurred, can find crucial advice.

Unlike jobs with clearly defined 9-to-5 schedules or delineated tasks, our roles in higher education often demand a seemingly endless list of responsibilities with ambiguous parameters. We are expected to be excellent teachers, prolific researchers, and engaged community members. The pressure to go above and beyond can be immense and while our roles are dynamic and organic to our environment, often our benchmarks are dichotomous: success or failure, with success being set at an extremely high bar...the perfect academic.

I recently spoke with a friend who supervises city employees in Tulsa, OK. He described a "perfectly mediocre" employee who meets all their job expectations but never does anything extra. My friend’s supervisor felt that the employee in question needed to be doing more but there was nothing particularly obvious of what this “more” should be. My friend asked my advice on how to handle it and I offered “this person was hired for a position, does it well but not outstanding, so there really is not a problem.”

This same pressure to excel where there is neither room for nor need to excel exists greatly in academia. I remember going through the tenure process, where I was required to "exceed expectations" in at least two of the three key areas: teaching, research, and service. While I enjoyed

exceeding expectations in service, it became a double-edged sword. There are countless opportunities for service, both on and off campus: from journal editorships and committee work to community boards and consulting. With only 24 hours in a day, it is easy to get overwhelmed. While accepting I cannot be perfect all the time, I have also had to add a new response to my lexicon: no.

I have learned to on occasion decline committee invitations, say no to advising a student organization, and turn down requests to be a track chair for a conference. Even within my primary job duties, I have had to learn to say, "I'm sorry, but I just cannot make that meeting today" or hop on that unplanned Zoom call. This is not about slacking off; it is about setting boundaries and protecting my time. Particularly for me as a Traumatic Brain Injury Thriver, concentration can be a precious commodity; breaking up a block of time in which research can be accomplished with a Zoom meeting is counterproductive to my overall success. Transitioning from a highly engaging classroom discussion on the four business level strategies to a community safety meeting on rising crime rates, equally challenging. I have learned that I can still be a vital team member, fulfilling my contractual and ethical obligations, without sacrificing my personal life or causing myself undue stress and actually manage to have fun at my job! Just as a cashier at Target or the President of the United States have the same 24 hours in a day, we in academia must also prioritize our time. We need to make time for the things that make us whole—whether that is writing a paper, cycling, knitting, or just reading a book—that has nothing to do with Narcissism and Toxic Work Environments—just for pleasure. We have to recognize, and be recognized for, acceptance that we cannot save them all nor can we be perfect all the time.

And so my advice to you.

Within this essay, I have offered three quotes of wisdom that I hope leads you the reader to a conclusion: take up figure skating!

Ah...I could not resist one last bit of humor.

As I step away as Editor of *QRBD* and close this chapter of my career, I do so with the knowledge that my colleagues and friends have not lost respect for me for making this choice. Viewing the world of academia now as a middle-aged, senior faculty member, the three quotes of advice I have offered here I pray amount to a meaningful lesson to you the reader, be you a doctoral student, junior faculty on the rise, mid career with choices to make, senior faculty looking back...or even a non-academic who somehow found this paper online, please remember:

True success is not about achieving perfection; it is about understanding and accepting our limitations which encourages us to find a balanced approach that values ambition and purpose while acknowledging the necessity of rest, imperfection, and loss. Ultimately, to be driven and dynamic we must also be realistic and compassionate with ourselves, recognizing that a relentless pursuit of perfection can be our most destructive force.

--Vance Johnson Lewis, 2025

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Epilogue

Charles Hazzard died at age 81 years on December 16, 2024, in Dallas, TX, after a short illness...the illness was probably the one thing Charlie did not invest much time in during his life. Thank you Charlie!

Michelle Kwan went on to win two Olympic medals and a total of nine national championships and five world championships. She also served as the US Ambassador to Belize and Director of Surrogates for President Joe Biden...things seemed to have turned out pretty well for her.

The employee of the City of Tulsa was fired for non-performance related issues. My friend asked me if I knew anyone who might fit the role.

The American Adventure is now in the 43rd year of its run at EPCOT and still uses the same script as it did on opening day; however, the original 1982 Mark Twain animatronic was updated in 1993...he now puffs on a cigar while quoting John Steinbeck.

And I, Vance Johnson Lewis, began the position of Associate Professor of Strategic Management at Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow (Oklahoma) in January 2025 and “[do] not plan to go visiting again” (Lewis, 2025: 37)...ah shameless self-citation.

Gratitude

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to The International Academy of Business Disciplines for the honor of serving as Editor of *QRBD*. Specifically, to Kaye McKinzie, Charles Lubbers, Margaret Goralski, Paul LeBlanc, Cindy Smart, and Paul Fadil...cheers to what has been accomplished and cheers for what is to come.

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