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Normalized Weekend Work: It Is Basically Like Homework, Right?

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CONDITIONALLY ACCEPTED

A SPACE FOR SCHOLARS ON THE MARGINS OF
ACADEMIA

01.14.14

by Jeana Jorgensen,
Ph.D.

DR. JEANA JORGENSEN REFLECTS ON “NORMALIZED WEEKEND WORK”

Dr. Jeana Jorgensen is a folklorist, writer, and dancer (see her full biography [here](#)). Her scholarship explores fairy tales and other narratives, dance, body art, gender identity, feminist theory, and digital humanities. She is a blogger at [MySexProfessor.com](#) and on [her own site](#) (including [many posts](#) on folklore and academia in general).

Below, Dr. Jorgensen has shared another guest post (see the first [here](#)), in which she raises the unspoken question about working beyond the 40 hours for which academics are typically paid. Enjoy!

Normalized Weekend Work: It Is Basically Like Homework, Right?

As I pulled the pile of grading into my lap on a Saturday evening, I paused to reflect on how normal it seems to do work on the weekends, in the evenings, and on the weekend evenings. These are normally coveted times for socializing, relaxing, and even doing unofficial labor like domestic tasks, relationship maintenance, and errands. I didn't used to have a problem with working on the weekends, but something has changed: *my perspective*.



Photo by James Moriarty

I was a student for the bulk of my life, going straight from high school to college, and straight from college to a PhD program (earning my MA on the way). When I finished my doctorate and starting adjuncting, for lack of other opportunities, I thought, okay, I'll take on some freelance writing work to help pay the bills. Since I was trying to remain **competitive** on the job market, I also made time to do my own research, which has included publishing articles, presenting at conferences, writing book reviews, and starting to work on my book proposal. Teaching plus freelancing plus researching plus writing plus publishing has led to a somewhat busy schedule, likely to the detriment of my relationships and personal life.

I'm not as bad off as some academic overachievers, like this scholar, Kate, who delayed routine health checks only to discover that **she had breast cancer**. But the more I think about the situation—what I'm putting in vs. what I'm getting out—the less I'm happy with working on

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weekends.

The disconnect came when I realized that working on weekends didn't used to bother me. In fact, back when it was just “homework” I usually enjoyed it (yes, I'm a nerd like that). I have to spend this weekend reading a book? Oh no, how terrible! I can only go to the party after I finish a first draft of a paper? Fine by me, I hate arriving early anyway since it feeds my social anxiety issues. It didn't seem that bad at the time.

Now, I realize that a large part of the reason I was totally okay with giving up evenings and weekends as a student was that it was supposed to be *temporary*. Being a student is a phase in one's life, during which one works very, very hard to achieve the kinds of grades and learn the kinds of skills that will help one land a job or achieve whatever the next life goal is. Then, in the mystical, magical place known as Adulthood, one would maintain sane working hours and actually have something resembling the oft-rumored free time.



Photo by James Moriarty

Obviously, life is life, and we'll never have as much free time as we desire. There will always be chores to do, sick friends to bring soup to, conversations about finances to schedule with partners. I balk, however, at accepting that I will always have to work weekends simply because I chose to pursue an academic career. Forcing weekend work on scholars is tantamount to assigning mandatory homework. The amount of labor implicitly present in academic job descriptions is deceptive, and I believe that the unspoken requirement to bring

work home infantilizes us, treating us as though we're still students, as though the institution always knows best, and we must always keep busy.

The blog post, "[Perfectionism and Its Discontents](#)," distinguishes between having (usually healthy) personal standards of excellence and having (usually unhealthy) perfectionist tendencies. What the blogger advocates is that academics have high personal standards, and that these "standards be *achievable*, that our successes be *recognized*, and that our mistakes be *accepted*." Is a job that implicitly requires take-home work encouraging its workers to subscribe to achievable standards? Will it recognize its workers' successes?

In my mind, if I am getting paid to do a job, I'll want to consider, among other factors, the hours involved, and how that correlates to the pay, the prestige, and what sort of good I'm doing in the world. I don't think it's unsustainable to expect scholars (or workers in general) to bring work home on some weekends or some evenings. However, it should not, in my view, be the norm without it being crystal-clear in the job description, without additional compensation, or unless the person chooses, without punishment or incentive, to take it on because they're really, really into what they're doing. This impulse to go above and beyond could be for institutional reasons (wanting to see a project through because it'll benefit everyone) or for personal reasons (getting excited about new research).

I know I'm in a bit of a slump, being between research projects, and still trying to figure out how I feel about being in my second year of [adjuncting](#), and attempting to plan my next move. But now that I've begun thinking of working on weekends as being akin to homework, I find myself less than eager to do it. Maybe my next exciting research project is just around the corner and I simply haven't caught sight of it yet. Or perhaps realizing that there are power dynamics at

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work in how you spend your time is a bit of a disincentive to expending more energy for an institution that isn't looking out for you. A little of column A, a little of column B?

Once I became more aware of this pattern, I've made the following attempts to work with this realization and deal with my resentment over it. Perhaps these strategies will offer you some ideas, too:

- I log hours like I would for a “real” job, thus letting me see if I've put in 8-10ish hours already. Then I might feel justified in calling it quits in the evening (granted, measuring intellectual labor is tough, so I try to use a mix of looking for measurable results, like finishing a draft of that syllabus or those article edits, and simply measuring the time I spend with my laptop or a book being productive, regardless of how much I accomplish).
- If there's a non-academic event I'm looking forward to, like dinner with friends or a dance performance I'm in, I will establish in advance that it's a priority, and that I will put down my work when it's time to go.
- If I really must work over the weekend or through the evening, I tell someone about it, so that I can be held accountable for that much work and not more. I'll tell my workout buddy that I need to finish a stack of grading before we can hit the gym, and if there's still grading waiting for me when I get back, I feel like it's reasonable to keep working until the grading is done, and then stop.

What are some of your strategies for dealing with academic “homework” once you're no longer a

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