

How to create order out of chaos

The “Organized Academic” shares how to transform your academic life.

BY HANNAH LIDDLE | SEP 26 2022

Elizabeth Wells has a tidy office, is on time for every appointment, and never pulls an all-nighter. She has had a successful academic career, winning teaching awards and having served as dean of a faculty of arts. And somehow, throughout all of this, she sleeps nine hours each night. Is she the perfect academic? No, she said. But she is organized.

After taking an administrative leave nearly two years ago, Dr. Wells decided to channel her passion for organization into a new book that she hopes will help other academics relieve some of the stress from the often-chaotic lifestyle that can come with a career in academia. Her labour of love, *The Organized Academic: How to Transform Your Academic Life*, is a trove of day-to-day techniques that can improve the personal and professional lives of those working in higher education. Below are three tips that she offers that could help academics regain control in their lives.

1. Write a mission statement

“Why am I here? Why am I doing this difficult job in the first place?” are questions that academics may ask themselves, especially when a bad day becomes worse. Answering these questions through a mission statement, said Dr. Wells, can help form the foundation for a more organized, effective and fulfilling career. She recommends setting aside time to reflect on your core values and what you want to achieve, and then condensing that into a few simply written sentences.

“It’s something that we don’t think about much as academics – we are given a job, we know what the job is, but what exactly is your scholarly mission? What do you want people to say at your retirement party about you?” said Dr. Wells. You can use the statement to assess how you are prioritizing your activities and the amount of energy you spend on them. “You have to be focused on what is really important to you and what you are enthusiastic about,” she said.

Another important benefit of a mission statement is that it can act as a motivator when you are feeling overwhelmed. Dr. Wells shared that she has one mission statement for each of the three pillars of her academic life – research, teaching, and service – but said that having one overarching statement works well too.

2. Embrace a long syllabus

When asked what is the one piece of advice that she would give to academics trying to free up time, Dr. Wells said, “a 20-page syllabus.” Yes, you read that correctly. Dr. Wells argues that a 20-page syllabus that details every element of a course will save hours of time and frustration during the term.

“If you don’t explain to students what’s going on in intricate detail one time – even though it took you lots of hours to do it – do you really have time to do it every single day after that?” she said. In some of her classes, not a single student has written her asking for clarification on the course content or assignments, she said, which is proof the technique can work.

3. Work in 25-minute intervals

Among Dr. Wells’s tips and tricks is one that might sound familiar: the Pomodoro technique. Theorized by Italian then-university student Francesco Cirillo in the late-1980s, the time-management method uses a kitchen

timer to break work into 25-minute intervals separated by short five-minute breaks. Each interval is known as a “pomodoro.” Once you have completed three pomodoros, you do a final fourth one before taking a long break of about 20 or 30 minutes. Then you start over again. (If you complete less than three pomodoros before your task is interrupted, you have to start at the beginning.)

Dr. Wells said academics worldwide have taken to the method. “I know a lot of academics are using this technique because what we do is very intense and we have to be very focused,” she said. She has found that by working in 25-minute intervals with a short break, she is able to return to the top of the clock with the same energy as when she began her task.

[The Organized Academic: How to Transform Your Academic Life](#) *will be published this November by Rowman & Littlefield.*