

Dear harried, super-busy, world-changing colleagues,

As we all steam towards the end of Spring semester, or towards the middle (!) of Spring quarter, we all, students, staff and faculty are acutely aware of too many obligations crammed into too little time. We are exhausted, overwhelmed, and hoping we can drag ourselves over the finish line, with the promise that then we can finally breathe, recuperate, and relax. And this happens Semester after semester, quarter after quarter every year. Maybe it is time to seriously ask “WHY?”

Partly, this is a societal problem. We live in a culture that equates success with busy-ness, living with the false notion that the more we can cram into our day, the more successful we are. It was only 30 years ago that the wonders of desktop computing, email, cell phones, and the internet began creeping into our lives. The promise of these marvelous technologies increasing efficiency and giving us more time did indeed come to pass, but our decisions of how to use that extra time took us down a very slippery slope. Instead of using our extra time to relax, read, reflect, listen to great music, or interact with friends, we began using the extra time to do even more work. Instead of stepping off the hamster wheel to enjoy the feel of the wood shavings between our toes, we had extra hamster wheels installed so we could step off one and climb right into another. It was dubbed “multitasking” and it became a sought-after skill. But science has shown that multi-tasking is a fiction. A truer definition would be “the ability for a single person to simultaneously perform multiple tasks less efficiently than if that person performed each individually.” So where is our relentless quest for increased productivity leading us?

Since I became a music school leader in 2008 until right now, one of the most common complaints from both faculty and students is that their stress levels are too high, they have too many commitments, and they are having trouble just keeping up. This sounded remarkably similar to what I used to hear at my former employer — hard-driving, fast-paced, tightly-wound, software company, Microsoft. I must say I was slightly surprised to see these same symptoms inside the ivory walls of academe. Part of the issue is the societal worshipping of the hamster wheel, doing more, because we can do more. The other part of the issue is that the students and professors are deeply passionate about what they are doing and want to take advantage of every opportunity available to them. This is a good thing. It is a great thing. It is also a bad thing. Cramming too many classes, ensembles, chamber groups, jobs, and other activities into a semester or a quarter, even if one passionately loves them all, can lead to less than memorable results. I offer a personal tale of woe as an example.

After a year or so as an undergraduate music major, I was doing well. I loved school and wanted to take all sorts of classes. Finally, I threw caution to the wind and added a Latin class to my already heavy load. All went well for the first five or six weeks, but after that, the ship started to sink. I spent every waking minute bailing out the ship—I wrote papers, read all night for my literature classes, studied German, practiced my trombone, and memorized hundreds of Latin vocabulary words. I got through the term with As and Bs, but it was an educational disaster—I was the epitome of a multitasker doing everything poorly! The cramming and sleepless nights that got me through the term also guaranteed that I have no lasting memory of *anything* I learned that term—none, nada, zilch—which means I learned nothing at all. The letter grades stand as a hollow reminder of my Lost Term. I would have been better off saving the tuition, sitting in a hammock and banging two coconuts together for three months. What a monumental waste of a golden opportunity!

So, as we all are experiencing the swirling maelstrom of Spring in academe, I am personally challenging myself, all of you, and our students to Do Less; to schedule time for reflection, contemplation, interaction, and decompression. Reflection is one of the most important aspects of learning. Sadly, it is usually the first thing that goes as we climb from one hamster wheel to the next. If a schedule has no oasis for reflection, then the schedule is too full. We need to follow the lessons of the environmental movement and preserve open spaces on our schedules! It won't be easy. We see time as empty space to be filled rather than a critical component to our education. This mindset needs to change. There will always be a tempting class to conveniently fill the open slot, but we must resist. If our goal is to think critically, learn deeply, and practice intentionally, time and space are vital to that process. It isn't enough to skim through a required reading at three in the morning because that is all the time you can give to that particular hamster wheel. An education deserves a more thoughtful approach. The London Underground tells us to “mind the gap.” I'm telling you to not only mind the gaps, but to honor the gaps, cherish the gaps, increase the gaps, bask in the gaps!

If we all, students, faculty, and staff, committed to reducing our commitments and assignments by even 10%, the results would be notable. Maybe that's one fewer piece on the orchestra program, one fewer paper assignment, one fewer quiz. Maybe that is a commitment to not only avoid reading emails on the weekend, but also to post an autoreply telling the world that you are committing to making space. Who knows who you might inspire. So, let's resolve to Do Less, because it is the surest path to learning more deeply, thinking more expansively, absorbing more thoroughly, and retaining more effectively.

As always, I would love to hear your best practices or big, beautiful ideas for making space, retiring the hamster wheel, and expanding the space-time continuum! Shoot me an email—but not on the weekend—at [\[email protected\]](#).

Keep Listening. Keep Dreaming. Keep Doing Less.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian Pertl". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Brian" and last name "Pertl" clearly distinguishable.

Brian Pertl
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