

Women and Men Together in the Academy: Institutional Implications

As more women receive Ph.D.s and set out to forge lives that include commitments to both career and family, universities must consider the implications of this shift for the resources and supports they provide. In addition, more men want to add commitments to their families to their traditional commitments to their careers, and this has similar implications. A recent survey of Princeton University faculty highlights the fact that the dual-career family has become the norm rather than the exception:

- Eighty-two percent of tenured women and 92% of tenured men are married or in a domestic partnership.
- Seventy percent of tenure-track women and 82% of tenure-track men are married or in a domestic partnership.
- Of those who were married or in a domestic partnership, 98% of tenured women and 75% of tenured men have working spouses or domestic partners.
- Among younger faculty, 96% of tenure-track women and 81% of tenure-track men have working spouses or domestic partners.

I believe the prevalence of dual-career families means that universities must revise their thinking in three ways. First, universities must understand that they have always provided resources and support for the personal lives of faculty. The shift in work/family life configurations outlined above simply changes the range and specifics of what must be provided. Second, universities in recent years have focused their support efforts on the assistant professor years when the competition between work and family life seems most acute. Now universities must also pay attention to graduate students and postdocs, in whose lives career and family formation are often taking place simultaneously. Third, as the family configurations of graduate students, postdocs, and faculty become more variable, the range of programs provided must increase so that

individuals can find the particular supports that matter to them.

Expanding Support as Families Change

Universities are strongly committed to having productive faculty. To accomplish this, they provide resources designed to help faculty be as accomplished as possible in their research and teaching. Much of this support has focused on the professional lives of faculty (e.g., laboratory space, equipment, etc.), but supports for family life have traditionally been provided as well. For example, universities have for many years provided health insurance, life insurance, housing, and tuition grant programs. This traditional configuration of resources served everyone well for many decades, but a different (and expanded) configuration is needed now that the prevailing norm is no longer men who concentrate on their careers and women who concentrate on their families.

Graduate Students and Postdocs Have Families Too

Since many assistant professors are already part of dual-career families, for many people the juggling that is an inevitable aspect of commitments to both career and family life must have begun during the graduate student or postdoc years. This suggests that universities need to consider the kinds of supports they provide for graduate students and postdocs beyond the traditional supports that have been provided for career formation.

The need may be quite urgent. At Princeton, we find that the percentage of women among the applicants for assistant professor positions is substantially lower than the percentage of women receiving Ph.D.s. Similar data have been reported at other research universities. There are many possible reasons for this consistent

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disparity. One hypothesis is that many women, daunted by the prospect of dealing simultaneously with family demands and career demands in the intense setting of establishing a tenurable record at a research university, opt for other professional venues.

Some support for this hypothesis can be found in an exceptionally interesting article in *EMBO Reports* that reported data from a survey of 1,300 intramural postdoctoral fellows at the National Institutes of Health.¹ Two-thirds of the male survey respondents but only one-half of the female survey respondents said that they were considering a PI position, and the disparity between men and women was even greater among respondents who were married with children. The survey asked respondents to rank 15 factors that could influence their decision to pursue a position as a PI. Across the board, the largest differences between men and women occurred on items that related to children, spending time with children, and spending time with other family members. (It is important to note that there were no significant differences between men and women in how they rated factors such as competition, managerial duties, or the need to obtain tenure.)

These data suggest that universities must find ways to help graduate students and postdocs, as well as faculty, balance the demands of professional and family life if they hope to take advantage of the full range of available scientific talent. It is important to remember that the early years of an academic career, which are full of uncertainty and which often require several household moves, are the years when the decision is made whether (or not) to proceed to a faculty career.

Want to Discuss Career and Life Issues Online?

A moderated blog, established by the Women in Cell Biology (WICB) Committee offers you an opportunity to discuss career, family, and other “life” issues. You’ll find the blog at www.ascb.org. Click on “Committees,” “Women in Cell Biology,” “WICB Blog.” To join the conversation, simply click on “create an account” at the top right of the page. Then respond to an ongoing thread or start your own. If you have questions, feel free to contact moderator Deepti Pradhan (deepti.pradhan@yale.edu). Looking forward to your participation! ■

Meeting Varied Needs

Families come in many different shapes and sizes, and indeed the configuration of individual families can change over time. Thus, the resources and supports that people need vary a lot. (This is of course also true for the professional resources and supports that people need— think, for example, of laboratory fittings versus library needs—but universities are accustomed to taking these differences into account.) Such varied needs suggest that universities should try to provide a panoply of policies and programs. At Princeton, where we have tried to do this, the programs include:

- For each new child in the family, automatic one-year extensions of the pre-tenure period for assistant professors and one-semester extensions of support for graduate students
- Grants for childcare when people are traveling to conferences and workshops
- Subsidized back-up care when any member of the family is ill
- Income-based grants to subsidize the cost of daily childcare

To learn more about the programs for Princeton faculty visit www.princeton.edu/dof/policies/family_friendly. To learn more about those for graduate students, visit <http://gradschool.princeton.edu/studentlife/childcare>.

A Final Point

Especially in the current economic climate, many university administrators feel that they cannot afford to provide all the personal and family supports for graduate students, postdocs, and faculty that are now needed. This is undoubtedly true. I would urge two things. First, it would be exceedingly helpful if every university would publicly acknowledge the importance of a range of policies and programs to support the new family configurations that impact the work of faculty, postdocs, and graduate students, and declare its intention to provide these supports when and if it can. Second, it would also be helpful if every university undertook to design and implement one or two low-cost policies or programs as a clear signal to its graduate students, postdocs, and faculty that it is determined to take advantage of all the available talent and to provide what is needed to do so. ■

—Joan S. Girgus, Princeton University

Reference

¹Martinez ED, Botos J, Dohoney KM, Geiman TM, Kolla SS, Olivera A, Qiu Y, Rayasam GV, Stavreva DA, Cohen-Fix O. (2007). Falling off the academic bandwagon: Women are more likely to quit at the postdoc to principal investigator transition. *EMBO Reports* 8, 977–981.