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... simply changes the range and specifics of what must be provided.

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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...
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.

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

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!

Reference

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