

Walking the line: balancing work and family

Juggling the demands of a career and a family is a challenge that confronts many researchers. Are universities doing enough to help academics cope with these often-conflicting commitments?

Few professions are immune from the stresses of balancing a career and family responsibilities, but the academic system throws up a unique set of obstacles, particularly for junior faculty members. The tenure system in North America and many parts of Europe and Asia provides an exceptional level of job security. On the other hand, it imposes a timeframe of 5–7 years during which junior faculty must establish their credentials if they are to attain tenure. Most academics find themselves in their mid-thirties by the time they are in their first tenure-track faculty position, a timeframe that coincides with an increasing awareness of a woman's 'biological clock'. This academic career structure has been held partly accountable for the precipitous decline in female representation in senior academic ranks (see September 2006 editorial).

The good news is that there is a growing recognition by universities and institutes that policies must be implemented to make an academic career more compatible with having a family. The impetus for this reform has come from a desire to address the gender imbalance in academia. But the conflicting demands of work and family are increasingly pressing issues for male academics, too, as dual-career couples become the norm and the responsibility for raising children is shared more equally between partners. Thus, policies that allow a healthy work–life balance for both sexes will be crucial for recruiting and retaining the brightest minds. Extending comparable benefits to both sexes is also essential to avoid potential hiring biases that disadvantage women.

Various US institutions now provide benefits such as affordable on-site day care, and have implemented initiatives such as stopping the tenure clock, allowing part-time work in a tenure-track position and temporary relief from teaching responsibilities. For example, the University of California at Berkeley has a programme to develop and implement family-friendly guidelines for faculty that incorporates many of these measures. Berkeley's policies extend not only to new mothers but also to their partners, as long as they have at least 50% primary care responsibility. The policy of allowing women faculty to stop the tenure clock is available at approximately 86% of US research institutions. At several institutions, the option to stop the clock is also available to men. But despite its widespread availability, studies indicate that its uptake remains low. Remarkably, a survey by Princeton University found that more men than women opted for stopping the tenure clock and that the latter were more apprehensive of potentially negative perceptions. To neutralize the associated stigma, some institutions now automatically extend the clock for new mothers. Princeton University, however, has gone one step further and removed gender from the equation by providing an automatic extension to both men and women who become new parents. Although

these policies provide much-needed respite to new parents, they are unlikely to entirely relieve them from the ongoing responsibilities of mentoring students and postdocs and from publishing competitive research and writing grants.

In Europe, the situation is somewhat different. Most EU countries have a generous system of state benefits covering maternity and paternity leave and rights to flexible working for new parents. Sweden takes the lead, with new parents being entitled to 18 months of leave that can be shared between the two parents. In addition, Swedish law allows a parent to work 75% of his/her normal working hours until the child is 8 years old. Although benefits in countries such as the UK, France and Germany are less lavish, they are more generous than state benefits in the United States. For example, women faculty at the universities in the UK are entitled to statutory maternity leave of up to 52 weeks and can request a phased return to full-time work or can work part-time on a temporary basis. Possibly as a result of these statutory rights, policies such as stopping the tenure clock have failed to take root even in the UK where the academic system is otherwise closest to that in the United States.

In contrast to the extensive effort to implement child-friendly policies, the options available for faculty staff caring for adult dependents such as a partner or a parent are currently limited. To become an environment that is broadly supportive of family commitments, it is vital that universities expand their policies.

Although these innovations are to be strongly encouraged, they do raise issues that are worth careful consideration. One is how clock extension is taken into account when making tenure decisions. The tenure-granting panel is typically asked to discount the extra year when evaluating an application. But what if the faculty member has been remarkably productive during that year? Can this policy be seen as discriminating against faculty who have not received an extension, either because they do not have children or because they have opted not to stop the clock? There must also be strict provisions in place to prevent abuse of these benefits. For example, it is important to ensure that faculty members who do not bear primary responsibility for childcare do not gain an unfair advantage by extending the tenure clock. This is certainly one concern with a policy that automatically stops the clock for both male and female faculty. The challenge is to design policies that provide benefits for some but do not discriminate against others.

Although progressive policies should exist that allow a better balance between career and family, ultimately, families require commitment and a compromise is inevitable.

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