

The Chair's Role in Helping Faculty Negotiate Work and Family Issues

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THE ISSUE AT HAND

Work and family is not unfamiliar to the higher education scene, but there has not been much written to department chair audiences. If chairs want to build departments of the best and brightest faculty, then they must be aware of the issues and concerns associated with the work and family needs of their faculty.

Since 2002, we have been actively involved in a research project that looks at the combination of work and family for junior women faculty. Initially, the project included interviews with 120 women at four types of institutions (research universities, regional/comprehensives, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges) and from a variety of disciplines. We published the findings looking at the unique context of research universities, community colleges, and comprehensive college faculty (see Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a, 2006b). In an ongoing attempt to understand work and family more fully, we also interviewed department chairs, senior faculty, and junior faculty (male and female) with and without children within given departmental contexts. In addition, we are now in the process of conducting follow-up interviews with the women in the initial study to learn more about ongoing work and family concerns.

One thing we have not done with our research to date is to share the findings with department chairs. As a result of our work we know that many chairs are well meaning when it comes to creating departmental environments that support faculty. Yet chairs may be stymied by how to accommodate faculty for work and family issues. They may ask: How do I create policy environments that are fair and equitable given the gendered nature of birth and babies? How can I create useful and utilized policies given the private nature of birth and babies? The purpose of this article is to outline the major findings of our research with attention to the department chair audience and to offer suggestions for creating policy environments that support faculty in their endeavors to be contributing members of academic departments.

WHAT WE KNOW

Based on our research we offer the following summary of our findings that should be of interest to department chairs.

Faculty with young children are managing their roles admirably. The roles of faculty and mother are not impossible to reconcile and there are many successful examples of women who do both well. This is an

important finding as so much of the prior research literature stresses the “peril” and “doom” of attempting to have both an academic career and a family, especially for women.

Faculty go to great lengths to “make it work” when it comes to having a baby. Faculty members manage work and family in spite of policy environments, not because of it. Our interview transcripts are replete with examples of individual women going to great lengths to make arrangements to “cover” for when they took leave associated with having a child. In many instances, chairs were the last to know about the solutions being created. The typical response we heard with regard to this finding is “I had everything worked out and then talked to my chair about what I planned to do.” While we are in favor of individual faculty members being proactive and taking initiative, the findings show that faculty members are going to great lengths to create solutions so that it appears that they do not need “help” and where they endeavor to miss as little work as possible.

The department level is key to making work and family issues work for faculty members. Typically, work and family policies are created at the institutional level, but a recurring finding from our research is the importance of the departmental context to help faculty manage work and family. Faculty and chairs are unsure of the availability of policies and, in particular, are unsure how to create situations where they can use the policies. Departments are the key to arranging solutions to work and family for faculty. Faculty must work with their chairs to find the best use of policy and/or arrangements to use policies associated with work and family. The department situation needs to be solid to either support the larger campus policy context or to compensate for it.

Faculty careers offer autonomy and flexibility, but academic work never ends. Autonomy and flexibility are hallmarks of the academic career. These characteristics of the profession are helpful and appreciated when it comes to combining work and family. New parents can simultaneously be home with their sleeping newborn at the same time they are working on an article. Certainly, this is a privilege not afforded to many other careers or jobs.

Unclear expectations. Lack of clarity was particularly pronounced at institutions that were in some way shifting their mission (e.g., moving up the academic ladder, increasing emphasis on research). For women on these campuses, there was uncertainty about how much work (and in what areas) was enough to get to tenure. This was an issue for all faculty at these institutions, but it was particularly pronounced for the new mothers we talked to who were suddenly not able to work all the time as a way to meet unclear expectations.

The situation is imbued with fear. We were struck and troubled by the extent to which the entire work process for new parents was imbued with fear. Faculty talked about fear of using policies, as well as fear about not getting tenure. Faculty also expressed fear that having a baby would be viewed as a sign of not being serious and fear that colleagues would be harsh critics about the choice to have a baby.

Don't ask, don't tell. A natural outgrowth of fear is silence. We found that there exists a culture of silence surrounding work and family in higher education. This silence was especially pronounced in our interviews with department chairs and senior colleagues, who felt uncomfortable talking to their colleagues about having children. Of course, niceties are exchanged and baby showers are planned, but straight talk about what type of leave arrangement a faculty member may need or how having a baby might impact productivity at work is a conversation that is avoided by all involved.

WHAT'S A CHAIR TO DO?

Given that so much of what we found points directly to departmental contexts, we thought it important to offer suggestions to chairs for effectively dealing with work and family issues among their faculty.

Be aware of and advocate for institution-wide policy. Chairs need to be aware of what policies exist on their campuses. If there aren't policies, then chairs need to be leaders in creating them. Campuses are becoming increasingly competitive when it comes to offering leaves as part of a recruitment package, and those campuses with more progressive policies stand to recruit and retain more qualified faculty than those who do not. We recommend institutions consider adopting the following policies:

- Provide unpaid leave in excess of the 12 weeks required by the Family Medical Leave Act to address the fact that semesters are typically 16 weeks in length.
- Offer paid family leave for family-related concerns for men and women distinct from sick, vacation, or short-term disability leave.
- Extend modified duties for a defined period to accommodate dependent care (e.g., release from teaching responsibilities in lieu of greater administrative responsibilities).
- Stop the tenure clock for faculty with primary or co-primary care giving responsibilities. The latest such policies are automatic and do not require the faculty to request that the clock be stopped.
- Offer part-time tenure-track options.
- Maintain affordable and accessible child care on campus and/or provide on-campus referral for child care services.

Call for department chair training. The lack of awareness regarding work and family policy suggests that the topic is not present at meetings of department chairs and new chair orientations. Chairs would do well to be a leader among their peers in starting the conversation.

Break the silence. A major finding of our study is that no one talks about work and family issues, especially with the person having the baby. Department chairs need to take the lead in talking about work and family issues in their departments. The silence is often well meaning in terms of not wanting to tread on a topic where conversation is not welcome, but creating a hospitable climate for work and family issues calls first and foremost for talking about them.

Share the wealth. If, as chair, you have developed creative solutions for helping faculty make arrangements to manage work and family, share your solutions with other chair colleagues. Part of breaking the silence is talking about work and family within the department and with chair colleagues. The other aspect to sharing the wealth is becoming familiar with the topic.

Adopt a life course perspective. One of the reasons work and family issues are “loaded” and thereby lead to fear and silence is because they often coincide with the tenure track—a critical period of time for junior faculty. By adopting a life course perspective, chairs can help normalize life events. Work and family concerns can take many forms and have different manifestations throughout the lifespan. Anyone can get sick at any time and need accommodation. Faculty members might find themselves caring for aging parents and therefore need accommodation. A junior faculty member may become pregnant while on the tenure track and in need of accommodation. There are different phases to the academic career and adopting a life course perspective can shift the emphasis of work and family as being the concern of only a few to being a concern of many. Such a perspective can help chairs deal with concerns about equity. We’ve heard from chairs that they are nervous about providing accommodation to junior women faculty with children and not to others. Adopting a life course perspective can show that people may need accommodation at any time and for different kinds of health and family issues.

Recognize power differentials. Chairs sometimes do not know their own power. One of the reasons junior faculty are fearful to ask department chairs for “help” is because of the power chairs have to make decisions that can affect faculty. By recognizing their own power, chairs might be able to understand better why a new assistant professor is reluctant to come to the chair and ask to modify duties to have a baby. Understanding this power relationship may help both parties come to beneficial solutions.

Covering classes. Typically, research is a preoccupation of faculty members, especially at research universities. However, across institutional types, a significant concern for faculty members in our study was how to cover classes during the semester in which a baby is born. Opting for an unpaid leave (as provided by the Family Medical Leave Act) is often not an affordable option for many faculty members and the 12-week leave provided does not account for the length of a typical academic term. Similarly, many new professors do not have sufficient sick leave to compensate for missing a semester’s worth of teaching. In helping faculty respond to work/family demands, department chairs need to think carefully about what needs to be taught,

when and by whom. There are a number of ways that the chair can help with this concern (depending on the specific policies of the institution):

- Allow faculty members to go on a modified duty status, where they continue to engage in service or research obligations, but are relieved from teaching responsibilities for a term. Courses taught by faculty members on modified duty would be cancelled or taught by someone else.
- Allow faculty members to bank courses (teach an overload in a different semester) so that they can be free from teaching during the semester in question.
- Let faculty members team teach a course with another professor (or adjunct or graduate teaching assistant).
- Consider offering the courses in alternative formats (online, condensed, etc.).

One size does not fit all. We are strong advocates for centralized policy offerings, but we also recognize that no one policy scenario can meet all faculty needs. Chairs must recognize that they may need to be creative with how they translate policy options for individual faculty members. A faculty member with a baby born with complications may need different accommodation than a faculty member with a trouble-free pregnancy.

CONCLUSION

We offer these suggestions, hopeful that department chairs will take a proactive stance in working with their faculty who have immediate work and family concerns. Departments that are aware of and open about meeting faculty needs and make reasonable accommodation are likely to be healthier in the long run and are more likely to recruit and retain high-quality faculty.

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