Balancing Work and Family for Faculty

Why It’s Important

BY JOHN W. CURTIS

More satisfaction, progress toward gender equity, and an edge in recruiting the best faculty—helping faculty balance their careers and their family lives promises benefits for all.

We are defined by the work we do. In the United States, and in the twenty-first century, there is no escaping that fact. We even define ourselves by our work, all of us to some degree. And yet we are more than the work we do. Each of us has multiple roles, and we interact together in groups: households, families, communities. And although we may define ourselves first by what we do, it is those personal relationships outside work that make us whole.

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The success of faculty members in balancing their academic careers with family responsibilities is a matter of more than individual happiness: it is also a matter of addressing structural inequities and attracting the most qualified candidates to the academic profession. To make it possible for faculty members to balance work and family, institutions must introduce policy changes—and faculty must take a closer look at aspects of the academic culture that have traditionally made such a balance difficult.

As academics, we sometimes do not consider what we do to be "work." Our teaching is more of a vocation, in the sense of a calling, than simply a job. Our research and scholarship spring from deeply felt curiosity, a drive to find the answer, a commitment to make things better. We volunteer to serve because we care about our institutions, our students, and our communities. Although confounding reality often makes it difficult to live "a life of the mind," even the most exploited among us experience the moments of inspiration that remind us why we wanted to do this work in the first place. And as we look at the careers we have constructed thus far, it seems like a natural progression from student to teacher, from research assistant to research scientist, from volunteer to leader.

By its nature, academic work is potentially boundless: there is always one more question to answer; one more problem to solve; one more piece to read, to write, to see, or to create.

...solve: one more piece to read, to write, to see, or to create. Still, this unbounded activity occurs within a structure of jobs and households. We do a job to make a living; our work is part of our contribution to a household.

Our jobs are part of the activity of a larger institution—whether we consider it to be a single college or university or higher education as a whole—and it is a "greedy institution," to use sociologist Lewis Coser's term. It increasingly attempts to appropriate the products of our academic work and offer them in the marketplace. In the process, it creates its own corporate imperative for growth and self-preservation—even if not for profit.

In an earlier time, this institutional imperative was the product of a collective effort, performed for the common good in a democratic society, and governed by incumbents of the collective itself. In this context of a collectively defined mission, the interests of the faculty member and the institution generally coincided. But the relationship between college or university and academic worker has changed. The institution no longer receives the level of funding from public sources that it once did, and the drive to attract revenues from other sources has pushed institutions to pursue "bottom-line" strategies to achieve short-term goals—with little apparent consideration for broader or long-term goals. These strategies include a shift to research, service, and academic "products" that have market value, and changing relations with employees: outsourcing support functions, increasing use of faculty with contingent term appointments, and requiring researchers to obtain outside funding even for their base salaries.

But we should not idealize the past situation, either. Earlier, tenures, nearly all faculty members were men, and all were presumed to be committed entirely to their academic work. Careers did not include time for primary caregiving. Even when open discrimination against women faculty members eased, many women found the structure of academic careers too restrictive in a society that still expected them to bear the largest share of family caregiving and household work.

Structural Inequity

This expectation of total commitment to an academic career has been slow to change. One consequence is a continuing gender inequity in the faculty as a whole. Women now make up about 42 percent of all college and university faculty, but women are still disproportionately found in community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and lower academic ranks. They are also more likely than men to be in part- or full-time non-tenure-track positions.

Some would argue that the disproportionate representation of women in teaching colleges and contingent faculty positions
who choose contingent faculty positions to balance work and family make a decision that limits their academic freedom. Because they rely on their jobs to meet their family responsibilities, their academic freedom is perhaps even more tenuous than that of men in contingent positions. How free are they to press their students to explore contentious issues when the livelihood of their families is at stake? Dare such faculty members present a controversial finding when their position for the following term—indeed, for every term—depends on the hiring decisions of administrators seeking to maximize enrollment and minimize controversy? The rise of contingency in faculty employment is the most serious problem in higher education today. The inequity of such an employment structure is doubly obvious when it strongly disadvantages one gender over the other.

**Advantages of Restructuring Faculty Work**

The argument in favor of restructuring academic work and careers to support faculty members' family obligations does not rest entirely on addressing inequity, however. Institutions themselves benefit by offering their faculty and graduate students more options.

At some point in our working lives—usually at several points—each of us experiences family-related changes that affect our ability to work. A decision to marry or divorce, to have or adopt children, even the potential for missing an important event in a child's life, can produce stress or anxiety, as can the illness of a loved one, whether it is short or long term. Employees who are anxious about loved ones and forced to work despite the situation are distracted and therefore less productive. Institutions of higher education, like other employers, can ignore these distractions and press for continued productivity, or they can attempt to replace employees they view as unproductive for these reasons. But the worries about family are going to be there whether the employer acknowledges them or not, and they affect everyone at some point. Employees who can take some time—an hour, a day, or several months—to deal with difficult situations can return to their work with a renewed focus. It seems only logical that the commitment and support demonstrated by the employer will be returned in the form of increased productivity and commitment by the employee.

Colleges and universities invest enormous resources to train, hire, and support early-career faculty. By establishing a climate that helps those faculty members succeed, institutions save themselves the costs—both monetary and programmatic—of recruiting new faculty. And when an institution can demonstrate that it offers its faculty that kind of support, it will have a strategic edge in attracting the most qualified faculty. (Such a strategic advantage is one objective of the University of California's family-friendly initiative for faculty, described by University of California, Berkeley, researchers Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden in their article in this issue.)

**Great Expectations**

In a way, the expectations we have for work-family policies for faculty are somewhat like the demands formerly placed on women academics: we expect them to do it all. We look to the development of these policies to solve problems of gender inequality, to help institutions to attract and retain the best and most dedicated faculty, and, along the way, to create satisfying and productive careers for all faculty, men and women alike.

It wasn't fair to expect women faculty to do it all, and it's not realistic to think that work-family policies alone can address all of these issues. The change required is as much cultural as it is structural. And it is change in which faculty must take a leading role.

Other articles in this issue note that many institutions have already created policies that make it more feasible for faculty members to blend their careers and personal lives successfully. But many other institutions have yet to do so, and encouraging faculty to use policies will continue to be a challenge. Junior faculty will not feel free to take advantage of the policies until they see successful examples all around them of others using the policies to maintain family commitments while pursuing academic careers. For this to occur, the culture of faculty work must change. And for that to happen, there must be structural change in institutions.

Faculty members themselves should recognize and acknowledge that an exclusive commitment to career is neither necessary nor desirable. The unbounded, and occasionally self-directed, nature of academic work is one reason it's often difficult to convince academics of the need for collective action. But in recognizing the need for equity across the faculty, departments, schools, and institutions can begin to change the culture of faculty work. Together, we can achieve the goal articulated in the AAUP's 2001 *Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work*: "to create an academic community in which all members are treated equitably, families are supported, and family-care concerns are regarded as legitimate and important."