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Author: Martha Ackelsberg, with Gayle Binion, Georgia Duerst-Lahti, Jane Junn, Laura Van Assendelft, Bang-Soon Yoon

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Remembering the “Life” in Academic Life: Finding a Balance between Work and Personal Responsibilities in the Academy

Martha Ackelsberg, *Smith College*
with Gayle Binion, Georgia Duerst-Lahti,
Jane Junn, Laura Van Assendelft, and
Bang-Soon Yoon

*Report of the Committee on the
Status of Women in the Profession,
2004*

- A senior male faculty member in a political science department discovers that his wife has cancer. She will need to undergo a combination of chemotherapy and radiation treatments over the next six months, treatments that will require her traveling to, and remaining overnight at, a hospital that is a 3-hour drive from the campus. Their only child lives over a thousand miles away.
- A young professor, a rising star in the profession, learns that his/her widowed father has Alzheimer's disease. The father is living alone, and the professor is his only child.
- A senior female faculty member finds that a person near and dear to her (close friend, sister, nephew) has just been in a terrible accident. S/he will recover, but will require extensive support during the rehabilitation process. The friend has no relatives, and few other close friends, nearby to provide the needed support.
- A junior faculty member, proud father of a two-year-old child, learns that his wife must remain in bed for the last three months of her second pregnancy (three months that overlap substantially with the teaching semester).

In recent years, institutions in both the academy and in the private sector have come to recognize the array of commitments and responsibilities that affect the working, as well as the non-working, lives of their employees. As our society ages, as social supports are constricted, and as household structures become ever more diverse, more and more employees find their work-lives constrained by familial and other care-related personal responsibilities. Whether we think in terms of dual-earner families in which both partners may be juggling

multiple roles, single-parent families in which the illness of a child, or of a child-care provider, can wreak havoc with the most carefully-structured plans, or of single person households when an individual is suddenly called on to care for ill or aging parents or friends, many of us have fairly-immediate knowledge of a colleague whose work has been directly affected by the need to meet familial or other personal responsibilities. In response, both corporations and professional organizations have begun to address these issues, usually in the frame of what are commonly referred to as “family-friendly policies.”

In 2001, under the leadership of then-president Bob Putnam, the APSA Council asked the Committee on Education and Professional Development (EPD) to review research on “family-friendly” workplace practices, and to propose what APSA could do to identify “best practices” and to promote professional regard for family-friendly policies. While the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) has called attention to the conflicts or tensions between work and family responsibilities in many of its prior reports, the CSWP began its current examination of these questions in response to a request to contribute to the EPD Committee's discussions. In addition, last year, the APSA Council created a “Working Group on Work and Family,” which then, in collaboration with the Departmental Services Committee, sponsored the 2003 Conference for Department Chairs on the topic, “Family-Friendly Policies and Controversies.” Martha Ackelsberg, chair of the CSWP, participated in that workshop. Although both the Committee on EPD and the Working Group have explored these issues, both groups seem to view their roles as “information gatherers,” and have not issued reports to the general membership.

CSWP, meanwhile, has also reviewed the literature in hopes of alerting our colleagues to problems related to work-

family conflicts in the discipline, and to begin a conversation about possible best practices. We offer this report, then, as an initial contribution to what will surely be an ongoing process. In it, we provide a review of some recent work on “work-family” tensions within academia, and offer some suggestions about what we might do as a profession to address them. We are aware, of course, that political scientists working within the academy are rarely in a position to create new policies on their own: each of us is subject to employment policies that apply to our institution as a whole and over which we may have had little input or control. Nevertheless, as we have learned through our review of the relevant literature, department chairs and senior faculty members have a significant degree of latitude in how they choose to implement existing policies; and they certainly have an impact on overall departmental climate. Hence, this report will explore the broader context, but also attempt to make clear what we can do at the level of our individual departments.

As the above scenarios make clear, policies that enable colleagues to develop a better balance between workplace and personal responsibilities affect *all* of us, regardless of age, sex, or stage of career. It is difficult for men as well as women to integrate work and family responsibilities effectively. Nevertheless, since women generally bear the brunt of child-rearing responsibilities, those conflicts exact a greater toll from women than from men.¹ Consequently, overcoming barriers to women's equal participation in the academic workforce will require us to change the ways our institutions structure the relationship between work and family. At the same time, although we have undertaken this study because of our mandate to address the status of women in the profession, it is clear to us that better policies will improve the quality of life for all in the profession, regardless of gender or family status.²

What is the Problem?

In recent years, both senior departmental faculty members and academic administrators have come to recognize that maintaining a quality faculty requires serious efforts in the areas of both recruitment *and* retention. Much of the attention to date, of course, has focused on the recruitment (and, to a lesser extent, retention) of female and minority faculty members. Thus, as we noted in our last report, referring to the relatively low numbers of women (of all racial-ethnic backgrounds) and men of color among tenured faculty, “a considerable gap exists between a professed commitment to inclusion and the creation and maintenance of organizational and institutional structures that actually provide a welcoming climate that would serve as the basis for such inclusion” (CSWP 2001). A variety of reports over the years have referred to a “chilly climate” for women and members of minority communities in academic departments. In addition to overtly discriminatory practices, however, researchers are now pointing to what a recent UC initiative refers to as “leaks in the academic pipeline for women”: “at nearly every stage of an academic career—from securing a tenure-track position to achieving associate and full professor status—married women (both with and without young children) leak out of the academic pipeline at a disproportionately high rate” (University of California, “Family Friendly Edge”).³

Studies have documented that one significant source of tension—and, thus, of the “leakage”—is the difficulty in achieving a balance between work and family responsibilities. And, since newer generations of parents may be trying to strike more equitable balances in caring for family and children, these tensions will increasingly affect men, as well as women. Thus, if we are desirous of attracting—and retaining—the best possible colleagues to our institutions, we have to be better prepared to enable them to address the balance between work and family commitments.

As it is now, academic institutions—like most other professional organizations—assume the norm of an “ideal worker”:

The ideal worker is someone who enters a profession immediately upon receiving the relevant credential, works his or her way up the career ladder by putting in long hours without interruptions beyond short vacations, and continues in this fashion until retirement age. The ideal worker can contribute financially to the

family, but cannot make substantial time commitments to children or other family members without endangering his or her career. Pay and promotion systems, rules around working time, and the beliefs of those from previous generations who have succeeded as ideal workers and currently manage our organizations, are all built upon the presumption that only ideal workers should be hired, retained, and rewarded (Drago et al. 2001, 3–4).⁴

This norm developed, of course, at a time when most academic professionals were men (with wives at home to take care of whatever children they fathered or any relatives who became sick or disabled). Nevertheless, the norm now affects both men and women in the academy, who participate in a variety of differently-structured “family” forms, making this model of an “ideal worker” increasingly untenable. And, given the fact that, even in most contemporary academic communities, women tend to take on greater responsibilities for caregiving than do men, and that the period of most intensive work to establish an academic career tends to coincide with prime childbearing and childrearing years, this factor may contribute significantly to inequities in faculty status, promotion, tenure, and salary (AAUP 2003; Yoest 2003, 7; Bailyn, Drago, and Kochan 2001; Fox 2001; Nerad 2004; Mason and Goulden 2003). Such inequities need not be the result of conscious or deliberate discrimination. As the Penn State study noted: “Such ‘discrimination’ would occur not because of any dislike of children or other dependents, but rather because caregiving activities signal that the faculty member is not an ideal worker and is therefore a substandard academic” (Drago et al. 2001, 4). Note, of course, that *anyone*—male or female, married, single, or in a same-sex partnership—who engages in caregiving work would be “suspect” under this norm.

What is particularly disturbing—though not, perhaps, surprising,—is that many programs designed to address these tensions are significantly *underutilized* by faculty members, even when they exist. Thus, studies at Penn State University, the UC campuses, and elsewhere suggest that those who might utilize such policies hesitate to do so for fear of being viewed as insufficiently committed to their careers (Drago et al. 2001, 4, 10–11, 53; University of California, Faculty Family Friendly Edge “The Pool Problem”; Yoest 2003, 13; AAUP 2003).⁵ Indeed, the Penn State researchers developed the concept of “discrimination

avoidance” to explain the reluctance of faculty members to take advantage of leave and other policies:

Faculty men and particularly women may be aware that ‘discrimination’ would follow in the wake of substantial and public commitments to family. They may therefore respond by either avoiding family commitments they would otherwise make . . . or spending time developing and implementing strategies so that parenthood and caregiving are hidden from others at work. Evidence of ‘discrimination avoidance’ would imply that for many faculty, men as well as women, choices around family are severely constrained (Drago et al. 2001, 53).⁶

Additional barriers confront academic professionals with family responsibilities. One is the *political* climate with respect to family and child-care responsibilities in the U.S.: the absence of adequate government policies and programs addressing family care needs, the growing shortage of good child-care or elder-care facilities, and the increasing tendency toward privatization of social services in general. While public policies encourage (or force) increasing labor-market participation on the part of parents (especially women) with children, funding for support services (child-care, elder-care, parental leave, etc.) have not grown proportionally. Thus, as the demands on working parents/children/family members increase, the publicly-supported and readily-available resources that would enable them to meet those demands are shrinking—placing ever greater demands on employees to devise individual solutions. The burdens of these inadequate accommodations, of course, are borne not only by the individual employees, but also by their employers (in our case, colleges and universities) and co-workers (colleagues) who are forced to “take up the slack.” A second difficulty is that, as we noted above, departmental colleagues (even department chairs) are hardly “free agents” with the power to make policy for their units. All of these actors operate within highly constrained environments in their own institutions. State laws and regulations, collective bargaining practices and agreements, and university policies dictate the frameworks within which academic political scientists are free to operate. Nevertheless, as our review of existing studies suggests, these constraints make it all the more important to create department-level practices that are as responsive to conflicting demands as possible.

What Can We Do?

Most generally, we need to create a climate in our institutions that is open to and supportive of the variety of ways in which faculty members undertake caregiving work (whether to partners, children, elderly parents, or others in the community). Obviously, individual departments rarely make university or college policies; rather, they operate within a context created within that larger institution. Nevertheless, departments and department members *can* make a difference—both in advocating for generous policies at the level of their institutions and in implementing existing policies in the department in the most supportive manner. In this section, we offer a broad view of the arenas that would need to be addressed to enable our colleagues to strike a better balance between workplace and other commitments, and we review the recent literature on the importance of these issues to the academy. Finally, we offer some suggestions about implementing change culled from the private sector.

Areas to be Addressed

A quick review of existing reports—both by this Committee, and by other Committees of APSA and elsewhere⁷—suggests that we must define the problem broadly. Virtually all research on this topic notes one important starting point that would hardly seem to need mentioning, let alone emphasis: **Departments (especially chairs) should be aware of what their institutions offer in the way of family-related policies, and should take the initiative in making that information available to current colleagues, as well as to prospective faculty members.**

Beyond that, the range of such policies is considerable. Ultimately, at least each of the following areas (in no particular order) needs to be addressed:

- Timing of the tenure clock, to make accommodations for dependent care
- Definitions and expectations of “service” at the level of the department and the college/university
- Availability of mentoring programs
- Availability of pregnancy and of parental leaves
- Flexibility in scheduling of classes
- Scheduling of department and committee meetings
- Help in finding jobs for spouses/partners

- Greater transparency of policies
- Tuition benefits for children/spouses/partners of faculty members
- Availability of domestic partner benefits
- Availability of on-site child-care
- Requirements for grants (especially fieldwork grants that may require recipients to be out of the country for extended periods, with no funds for visits and no funds for support of dependent care)
- Leaves and medical coverage

While most of these policies affect faculty members most directly, some are of particular concern to graduate students who also may be balancing family and career responsibilities. These include:

- Structuring of grants (to allow for shorter times away for research, dependent care expenses, and/or visiting)
- Leave policies
- Time-to-degree clock
- Placements/rankings for those students on the job market (are those with family responsibilities seen as “less serious” by placement directors)?
- Availability of child-care during class and seminar times

Rather than reviewing and discussing how to implement all possible policies consistent with AAUP policies and the missions of our institutions, we call the attention of readers to two recent reports of great value: the AAUP’s “Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work,” adopted by the AAUP Council in November, 2001 (www.aaup.org/statements/REPORTS/re01fam.htm) and the Final Report to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for the Faculty and Families Project, The Pennsylvania State University, Work-Family Working Paper #01-02, March 14, 2001 (available at <http://lsir.la.psu.edu/workfam/FFFinalReport.pdf>). Both reports are well worth considerable study. They document the need for more creative policy initiatives and offer suggestions for how to help faculty members achieve a better balance among their many responsibilities and commitments. The AAUP document, for example, offers a variety of principles and guidelines that fall into two general categories: “(1) general policies addressing family responsibilities, including family-

care leaves and institutional support for child and elder care; and (2) more specific policies, such as stopping the tenure clock, that specifically relate to pretenure faculty members who are primary or coequal caregivers for newborn or newly adopted children.” Additionally, the report notes that “transforming the academic workplace into one that supports family life requires substantial changes in policy and, more significantly, changes in academic culture,” changes that will require “a thorough commitment from the leaders of educational institutions as well as from the faculty. No template of policies fits every institution, but it is essential that the priorities, workloads, rewards structure, and values of the academy permit and support an integration of family and work” (AAUP 2001, 2–3).

Steps toward Successful Implementation⁸

We need to think, then, about institutional habits, customs, and traditions that may have been based on the “ideal worker” model and which do not really fit contemporary familial and employment structures. Some could be easily changed. For example, when elementary school holidays fall on different dates than college/university holidays, university-related families (whether faculty members, graduate students, or other staff members) can be caught in a difficult squeeze. The Penn State report describes how that university has moved to coordinate several of its holidays with the public schools, thus easing some of the burdens on working parents.

As a department chair in political science, or as a department member who wants change, how might one undertake a process of departmental (or institutional) transformation?

First, gather relevant information:⁹

- Inventory current institutional and department policies related to balancing work and private lives, and publicize these policies to the department.
- Determine who in the department has used each of the policies over the last several years.
- Check to see if a full range of policies exists. These should include family leave that allows time for elder and illness care as well as infant care; dependent care reimbursement accounts; on-site child care facilities; flexible scheduling for commuters; stopping the tenure clock for pregnancy, illness, or dependent care; and formalized mentoring processes, to name just a few.

Second, explore the scope of extant policies in terms of meeting departmental members' needs.

- Ask how well the policies serve them and if the policies could be improved;
- Probe for gendered and other differential aspects of the policies. For example, does parental leave function like a research sabbatical for male faculty members while female faculty members are bogged down in physical or emotional recovery from childbirth? Does family leave allow all faculty members the option to care for ill partners or parents? Do departmental norms or incentive structures discourage faculty members from taking advantage of leave policies?
- Focus on other department practices such as social events, decision processes, course scheduling, and advising assignments that help and hinder individual success. Remember that apparently gender-neutral processes may have differential impacts. For example, a department custom of leaving the

most junior faculty members last in choosing course time slots may harm those with heavy parenting obligations.

Third, investigate and test changes that might improve the situation, even if it means becoming a "test site" for institutional reform.¹⁰

- Try innovative approaches such as modified duties that shift workload to less teaching and more project work, rather than offering leave as the only option. Modified duty often allows a faculty member to maintain full pay while having the flexibility, for example, to help an elder make a series of medical appointments.
- Consider, as another example, the option of stopping the tenure clock even without leave, so that single paycheck households can make it over a hump in their private lives without being penalized for problems unrelated to their overall ability.
- Monitor the "plum" opportunities to ensure they are distributed fairly, and keep track of service work and other duties that take time but reap few rewards.

Fourth, discuss and adjust.

- Continue talking both with individuals and the department as a whole.
- Monitor and evaluate in a variety of ways to assess the utility of new approaches.
- Be ready to drop new practices and programs that do not work well, or adjust and substitute a different idea.

Fifth, have accountability measures and commensurate reward and incentive structures.

- Make your practices known to the outside and have institutional or disciplinary advisory boards judge progress.
- Work to identify and expand policies and rewards that improve productivity and life balance.
- Remember that having a truly diverse faculty (along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality) is the best way to ensure a department in which all individuals can achieve their full potential.

Notes

*Members of the Committee for 2003–2004 are Martha Ackelsberg, chair; Gayle Binion, Georgia Duerst-Lahti, Jane Junn, Laura Van Assendelft, Vera Fennell, Laura Woliver (ex-officio, Women's Caucus for Political Science), Lisa Brandes, Bang-Soon Yoon, and Shirley Geiger, prior members of the Committee, participated in the initial conversations that led to this report. We are grateful to Bahram Rajaei and Sylvia Bronson for staff support.

1. A variety of reports of the CSWP and of others have directed attention to women's differential success within the academy. Although the numbers of women in academia have been growing, the status of women in the academy has not improved as dramatically: women remain disproportionately clustered in the lower ranks of the academic ladder, underrepresented at research institutions, overrepresented in community colleges, and disadvantaged in terms of salary. This pattern holds true in our profession, as well. And, although there has been improvement in the last 10 years, significant gaps remain. See, for example, Stetson et al. 1990; Guy 1992; van Assendelft et al. 2001; and Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 2001. APSA recently received funding from NSF to explore what can be done to advance the progress of women within the discipline. A one-day workshop, held at APSA in March, 2004, reviewed data on the status of women in a variety of social science disciplines, as well as in political science, and indicated that "familial" responsibilities are among the significant barriers to women's equal participation within the academy. See, for example,

Nerad 2004; and Hesli et al. 2004. See also Finkel and Olswang 1996; Mason and Goulden 2002; 2003; Young and Wright 2001.

2. For a more general discussion on the place of "family-friendly policies" within the academy, see AAUP 2001, 1–2; University of California, "Family-Friendly Edge"; Yoest 2003, 14–16; Bailyn, Drago, and Kochan 2001; Drago et al. 2001; and Mason and Goulden 2002; 2003; Blackburn and Hollenshead 1999; Ferber and Loeb 1997; Friedman, Rimsky, and Johnson 1996; and Harris, Grandey, and Blair 2002.

3. See also Yoest 2003, 14, and sources cited there.

4. See also Levine 2000 and American Association of Family Consumer Services.

5. See also Friedman, Rimsky, and Johnson 1996. Indeed, impact analysis of the Family and Medical Leave Act suggests that underutilization (of an admittedly inadequate benefit) is common, precisely because of fears about perceived lack of commitment to one's job.

6. See also Yoest 2003, 13; and Mason and Goulden 2003.

7. See Stetson et al. 1990; Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 2001; Guy 1992; van Assendelft et al. 2001; 2003; and Hesli and Burrell 1995.

8. The strategies suggested here are based on a review, conducted by Georgia Duerst-Lahti, of successful private sector approaches to achieving greater gender equity within organizations. See Dreher 2003; McCracken 2000; and Meyerson and Fletcher 2000. The importance of overall *climate*, and the responsi-

bility of senior faculty members to address that climate, however, is also a primary finding of Mary Frank Fox's studies of women in the sciences in the academy. See especially Fox 2001, where she notes that the problem is organizational, and the solutions, therefore, must also be organizational.

9. This is one arena in which APSA could be of assistance with respect to further data-gathering about the discipline in general. The Association surveys department chairs annually; in 1999–2000, the survey included a Question 27: "Additional employment policies or services," that asked chairs to report about the availability of the following services on their campuses: day care facility, subsidy for day care, paid and unpaid maternity leave, paid and unpaid parental leave, leave for family illness, stopping tenure clock for female faculty on parental leave, stopping tenure clock for male faculty on parental leave, part-time tenure-track positions, shared positions for dual career couple, and health care and insurance benefits for domestic partners. Alas, this question has not been included on subsequent surveys. The CSWP encourages the Association to consider including it again—perhaps on a triennial or quadrennial cycle—so that we can track these changes over time and explore the relationship between the availability of these policies and the advancement of women faculty members.

10. For additional specific suggestions see AAUP 2001; Blackburn and Hollenshead 1999; Drago and Williams 2000; Ferber and Loeb 1997; Varner and Drago 2000; Gold 1996; and Harris, Grandey, and Blair 2002.

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