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Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family

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Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family

By Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012. vi, 263 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8135-5385-6 (paperback)

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Review

One common and long-held belief in academia is that a tenure-track academic career is incompatible with motherhood. The authors of this book – both faculty members and mothers themselves – sought to explore this widely-held belief and provide a counter-narrative for women unwilling to accept such a limitation. This book provides insight into how women successfully manage to be both tenure-track professors and mothers and seeks to debunk the myth that these two roles are mutually exclusive.

The findings in this book are based on a longitudinal study conducted from 1998 through 2008. Starting in 1998, the authors interviewed 120 faculty members who were also mothers from a wide variety of disciplines and institution types. These interviews focused on the relationship between professional and personal life and how these women managed both roles. At the time of the initial interviews, women were either newly tenured or still seeking tenure. Many were also new mothers working to balance responsibilities at home and work.

In 2008, the authors conducted a second round of interviews with 87 of the women from the initial study. Some of the women from the original interviews were unavailable due to sabbatical or leave time. Some were also no longer in academia or unable to be contacted. This second round of interviews focused on what had changed for the women in the 10 years from the first interview. The women were more established in their careers; many had attained tenure and

were comfortably advancing at their institutions. They were also mothers of mostly older children rather than babies which provided new challenges at home.

According to Ward and Wolf-Wendel, “A longitudinal perspective is unique in work and family research related to higher education and affords insight into the ongoing interaction between work and family and about how having children shapes decisions about the academic career over time.” (p. 26) This book explores the decisions that these 120 women made and how they made those decisions in relation to career and motherhood.

Ward and Wolf-Wendel begin the book by presenting their own family and career narratives. Each describes how she was able to successfully pursue an academic career while raising a family. Neither claims it was easy, but both were able to do it without regrets. Since the authors are faculty members and mothers, these narratives demonstrate that they are personally invested in their study and the findings presented in their book. Each subsequent chapter presents one or more narratives from study participants which illustrate the focus of that chapter. These narratives make the text more personal and relatable for the reader, providing him or her with a true example of the findings of the study.

Each chapter presents a different set of findings, starting with managing work and family in early career – graduate school, pre-tenure, and the first few years post-tenure. For many of these women, they were struggling to balance work responsibilities with pregnancy and very young children. Most were reluctant to request time off to accommodate childbirth. Several of the vignettes describe women taking only a few days off to give birth and returning to the classroom to finish the semester or timing their pregnancy and childbirth to coincide with summer break. While the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) became effective five years before the first round of interviews, many women were reluctant to use the leave guaranteed to

them by the law for fear that it would affect their advancement or tenure evaluations. Early career seemed to be the most challenging and stressful for the women included in the study as they tried to adjust to being new mothers and pursued tenure or career advancement.

Next, the authors turned to the second set of interviews to describe the women's perspectives on family and work in mid-career. By now, the women in the study were well established in their careers and had settled into their roles as mothers. In general, they were no longer pursuing tenure either because they had achieved it or moved to institutions where tenure was not required or offered. They were also managing families with older, more self-sufficient children. While balancing work and family was less of a challenge at mid-career, these women struggled with a reluctance to uproot established families in order to advance in their careers. Many of the women recognized that they had advanced as far as possible at their current institutions but were hesitant or unwilling to move their families in order to pursue new career opportunities. Some women felt stuck while others were happy with their decision to stay put for their families.

The next two chapters describe challenges experienced by women in different disciplines – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; humanities; social sciences; and professional fields – and at the different institutional types – research universities; comprehensive colleges and universities; liberal arts colleges; and community colleges. Some disciplines and institutional types seem to be more conducive to having a career in academia and having a family. However, all presented some challenges for the women in the study.

In the following two chapters, Wolf and Ward-Wendel spend time discussing the perspectives of women in dual-career households and those that left the tenure track. Women in dual-career households seemed to have similar challenges to women in mid-career with

established families. They were reluctant to move in order to pursue career advancement because they had a partner's career to consider. Ward and Wolf-Wendel also found that women were more likely to move for their partner's career, even if it meant jeopardizing or giving up their own career. While uncommon, some of the women in the study did just that by leaving their tenure-track positions, some to follow their partner's career and others because motherhood was the more attractive option. This finding was troubling to the authors as it served to further reinforce gender stereotypes of a woman's career being secondary to her partner's.

Ward and Wolf-Wendel devote the final chapters to a discussion of policy – both institutional and federal – and provide advice for all stakeholders to help women navigate the complex relationship between work and family. These chapters would be a valuable read for any time-pressed academic administrator searching for ways to advocate for the women on their faculties. They offer a brief discussion of the FMLA and provide examples of policies established at some of the colleges and universities represented within the study participants' work places.

In conclusion, I found this book to be very well-written and informative. I am not a faculty member or a mother – yet – but this book is applicable to all working women who are considering having a family. This book is also a valuable resource for academic administrators – department chairs, deans, and provosts – who may have women on their staffs who are struggling to balance work and family. The final chapter offers advice for how academic administrators can better support the mothers and mothers-to-be in their ranks. As evidenced by the findings of the study, many women were reluctant to request accommodations for fear of reprisals within their departments. Academic administrators can use the vignettes and advice in this book to better prepare themselves to support and advocate for these women.

As a higher education administrator, I understand the challenges of balancing work at a university with having a family. Long hours and evening and weekend commitments are not always conducive to balance between work and home life. However, I was encouraged by the vignettes and stories of the women included in the study. I am also grateful for laws and policies that protect women who choose motherhood and career and see that progress has been made on my own campus since I started working here nine years ago. I will be adding this book to my resource library and will come back to specific sections as I plan my own family and negotiate with my institution for the accommodations I need to be a successful higher education administrator and mother.

Biographical Statement

Heather Hall Lewis is an Assistant Director for Financial Aid at the University of Portland in Portland, Oregon. She holds a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Foundations from George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon.