

Mid-Career and Tenure-Track Women Faculty Work/Life Balance Focus Group
April 17, 2011

Attended by seven women: one senior faculty member/administrator, and six tenure-track assistant professors, two of whom are currently in the final stages of tenure review; four women with children (from elementary school age to grown), six partnered/married – mostly to men; four white, two Latina, one African-American.

In these notes, we have attempted to compile a list of significant themes that arose through an organic conversation. We have broken the themes into three sections: individual (as in themes that relate to problems and possibilities that different individuals confront), institutional (as in challenges and potential best practices that institutions meet and should consider), and values/structural (the larger theoretical frames and questions that may undergird the individual and the institutional). Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list, we hope that they will provide a place to begin thinking about foci. Many issues that appear in one section could easily be placed in another section when perceived from another angle.

One thing that emerged repeatedly is the way that many aspects of academic life are or have the potential to be either positive or negative:

In thinking about the value of academic work, there is a positive side to valuing it highly, as it can be experienced as a vocation, and a negative side: because it is experienced as an alternative to corporate lifestyles or capitulation to dominant values, we are, perhaps ironically, willing to tolerate certain kinds of pressures beyond what we would accept from industry.

In thinking about tenure and demands on tenure-track academics, the fact of significant flexibility in hours (for the most part) coexists with significant demands on time beyond what non-academics recognize. Several people raised the notion that a tenure-track position involves more than one job (teaching, advising/mentoring, faculty service, research), and though there are fewer fixed hours than in a 9-5 office job there are some very key hours (can't miss class for a sick child) and overall high pressures for productivity.

A variety of other pro/con sides to common features of institutional life and individual circumstances also arose and are signaled throughout.

Individual

Resources

- The challenge of graduate school training and pre-tenure professional life if one has a family to take care of financially (graduate stipends, housing, education for children)
- Tenure is equated with security but struggle and adjunct life is untenable for most families because of benefits. How does one navigate these choices and make them work?

Family Care

- Pros and cons of having an academic partner: flexibility versus challenge of joint job decision-making; dual pressures
- How does an academic navigate shared family responsibilities (child care or elder care) especially if one's partner is not an academic, but someone who also has a busy work and travel schedule? How does one create a schedule to accommodate family responsibilities (teaching schedules, balancing evening event expectations, etc.)?
- Handling the "two body" problem and institutional expectations?

Navigating the Institution

- What strategies exist for navigating institutional expectations that make community demands?

- How does one survive schmoozing?
- How do individuals from minoritized backgrounds navigate expectations of "face-time" within departments?
- How can individuals build healthful and supportive relationships within department and institution (instead of obligatory, hierarchical ones)?
- How can individuals plan for getting out of institutions that are just not good fits?
- How do you learn when and where to say "no"?
- What strategies exist for making decisions about what most matters to you? How does one then build a coalition with others who share those goals?
- How does one navigate feelings of powerlessness especially given the knowledge that there are so many more qualified PhDs than there are positions (and thus one feels easily replaced)?
- What are the institutional pressure points for individuals who want to make changes?

Work/Life Interrelationship

- Academics are often devoted to their work in ways that do not signal a neat work/life balance
- Work and life are intertwined, especially for those who support their families with their income.
- But how does one also navigate a job that often demands you be away from home so often?
- At the same time, individuals can resist the notion of constant preoccupation; individuals often have to learn not to sacrifice themselves before the notion of tenure; individuals often have to learn where and when to draw lines.
- Recognition of academy's gendered, cultural, and racial presumptions can provide a resource of critical distance from burdensome expectations

Institutional

Resources

- How might institutions better provide resources (financial as well as critical support systems such as child care and education) from graduate school through tenure for academics with familial obligations?
- How can an institution provide more resources for varying kinds of development (example of grants for faculty to pay an editor)?
- What about having quality of life surveys that make public information about faculty satisfaction and work/life balance?

Institutional Culture

- How can institutions shape themselves as relational spaces that foster a community without making unbalanced demands or masking hierarchy?
- How can recognition of the varying tasks of academic life be built in (that job is more than teaching and researching)?
- Can institutions adopt a kind of "diversity" or "visions" training for all incoming faculty? What would it look like? How can such training be used to provide a common language and sense of guidelines but also to prevent "blame, shame, and attack"?
- How can senior faculty do a better job of modeling work/life balance?
- If it seems that so much at an institution depends on its present leadership, how can policies be put in place to keep less mindful leaders in check?
- What institutions and departments already have practices we should all learn from?
- How can institutions ensure their faculty are affirmed and given credit for the diverse works they do and gifts they share?

Reconceptualizing Tenure

- Why are there not part-time tenure clocks?
- How can institutions create teaching schedules and community expectations that recognize the time commitments of family demands?

Mandating Self-Care

- How might institutions work at providing self-care resources and support for faculty (i.e. putting self-care questions into annual evaluation, asking how the institution can help, mandating two weeks of vacation away from office and email)?
- How will institutions balance changing expectations in the profession (Dept. of Education wanting to lengthen semesters? If one thing is added, where will another be subtracted?)?

Values/Structural

Individualism

- To what extent does academic life presume an individual "Robinson Crusoe" pursuing academic wisdom and self-discovery while having no family obligations, or even more so, having a second source of income (or a source of funding in addition to graduate stipends and junior faculty salaries)?
- How can academic life reconceptualize itself humanely? What would it mean to recognize the importance of humane, interpersonal relationships among colleagues?
- In what ways do individuals from minoritized communities (women, LGBTIQ, people of color, (dis)abled) overwork themselves and try to overcompensate? How do they navigate what are often greater familial and personal demands paired with institutions that tend to devalue their labor? How do women especially internalize ideas about womanly and nurturing navigation of academic labor?
- Is academic life a "vocational" commitment? Is it something one should only take up if one cannot possibly do something else, if one feels "called"? What are the possibilities and limits of such a conceptualization of academic life?

Work/Life Balance?

- To what extent does this discussion even depend upon Western liberal conceptions of labor? In what ways are "work" and "life" not so easily disentangled?
- In what ways do academics overvalue their labor and their skewed "workaholism" in order to justify the "life of the mind" in the face of a capitalist society that values material and monetary production?
- How might academic life be reconceptualized so an academic career could be more flexible?

Culture

- How can academic culture be reimagined so that individuals do not feel they "weren't thought of" in the design of this profession?
- How can academic culture reconceptualize itself so as to value the work of minoritized scholars in and of itself and not for the sake of numerical "diversity"?
- Should this guide not place its gaze upon the institution? The question should be how can the institution learn to accommodate young women not how can young women learn to accommodate the institution?

How can this guide be written in such a way that it is taken seriously academically? How might this guide challenge institutions to transform themselves, to make discussion of work/life balance an important part of institutional visioning and not just casual conversation over wine? How can this be a targeted and academically productive guide and not just a brochure?