

Tenured Women Faculty Focus Group on Work/Life Balance

January 17, 2012

Five women were present, all white, married or partnered and with children. Three were mid-career, two senior. Children ranged in age from pre-school to adult.

Concerns, problems, and questions

- Colleagues are more accepting of junior faculty involved in childcare than senior care.
- People who saw themselves as in a different place in relation to care than the mainstream of their departments felt the need to hide their involvement in care. *There was lots of talk about hiding and making the work of care invisible*
- When faculty members are clear about needing to do care work, colleagues are often annoyed.
- *Each faculty member feels the need to do her own juggling and sees lack of balance as her own problem.*
- It is not the case that people who have been or are in the same situation with regard to care work necessarily support or protect each other.
- The demand that junior faculty be present for lectures and college events does not fit with the need to meet the school bus.
- How does someone who is gendered to do care work function as an academic?
- One person commented that her husband doesn't necessarily prioritize her having a balanced life. She should either be working or involved in childcare. He's less willing to pitch in for self-care (like this meeting).
- What kind of role models are we for our kids as we negotiate with our partners around these issues?
- The assumption that faculty members who are home are "not working" is widespread and difficult to deal with.
- Part of the problem is that our feelings of identity and self-worth are closely bound up in our work. There is always the feeling that "if I publish another book or article or give another lecture, then I'll be valued." Work is a stand-in for other things.
- For more senior people, service to the profession becomes another pull alongside teaching and care work. Speaking engagements take a lot of energy at the same time that they can be rewarding. Sometimes it is financially necessary to accept them.
- The first five years of teaching, especially with children, is simply impossible.
- People sometimes left a sick kid at home propped up with the sports section, calling in and/or running home during breaks. How did we do it?
- It's easy to fall asleep in watching a show with family because we're so exhausted. Once we stop running, we come to a halt.

Strategies

Personal

- People wish they had known that colleagues were likely to have been far more sympathetic about crises than they feared or imagined.
- Babysitting can be part of research budget. No one tells you that.
- It's important to know who you can count on for help and support both inside and outside the university.
- Some people felt that moving close to the college/university was crucial in making things work. Others found it helpful to have distance from their institutions.
- A faculty member who lived near campus was able to bring her children to the office and have students babysit when she was in class.
- If one is going to have a balanced life, it can be complicated to have colleagues as close friends.

- While work can assume too much importance, it's also important not to put it in a corner.
- Read over your CV and appreciate all that you have accomplished.
- Decide how much committee work you can take on in a given year and say no when asked to do more.
- Enquire about compensation in the form of release time or money for extra work you do. What constitutes an overload besides taking on an extra course?
- It's important to be attentive to your own choices about where to put your energy and to be aware of how you are experiencing those choices in your body and your life.
- Know that "there is no such thing as an academic emergency."
- It is important to find community with whom to de-stress.
- Sharing issues around teaching is a way of creating community.
- It is important to tame technology—to put on your syllabus, e.g., when you will check your e-mail.

Institutional

- It's enormously important for a department to create a culture that acknowledges that people have lives.
- Departments need to make schedules on the basis of where people need to be when.
- Colleges/universities need to think about faculty needs in setting up broader scheduling patterns.
- Mentoring is very important, particularly mentors for junior faculty from outside the department.
- Institutions need gyms and places to take naps.
- Universities need to provide the option of stopping the tenure clock for pregnancy and childcare.

Larger Issues

- We debated whether balance is possible. Some people felt that pre-tenure, it's simply unrealistic, and it would be helpful for people to simply know, the next five years will be hell, but that's not the rest of life. Others were not willing to give up on the idea of balance. To be frazzled is not to be a productive member of the community.
- For people with children, there is only working or taking care of the kids. The rest of life disappears or is put on hold. Where does yoga fit in, e.g.? It doesn't.
- Religious community can be a potentially important counter to the work/care dualism. It can provide both an alternative network and a place of regular connection.
- Academics and nonacademics can have very different perceptions of what a balanced academic life looks like. One woman's husband thinks she always puts work first when from her point of view, she repeatedly puts family first.
- Balance is not a state of stasis that is attained and preserved. There are seasons to a life and, indeed, to a semester. Try to take a long view.
- Think about where you want to devote your major energy in a particular semester or year. A book project may be on the front burner one year but teaching another year. Pre-tenured faculty often do not have the freedom to think in this way but tenured faculty do.
- Do pressures on faculty members differ regionally? Is living in an area of the country where many people hike or ski different from being in the Northeast?
- It feels so wrong that we do work that is about meaning making but don't have time to make meaning in our own lives.
- How do we create a professional context in which the bar is different, in which people are admired and rewarded for living balanced lives? Why are there no half-time tenured positions, e.g.? How did the issue of shared jobs simply fall of the table?