

Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family

Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012

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Over the past decade, the demographics of women employed in higher education have changed dramatically (Statistics Canada 25). However, as the authors of this book highlight, although the demographics of the academy have changed, the normative view of the professor and ‘ideal worker’ have remained. While the authors focus primarily on the successful journeys of over one hundred women professors, pre-tenure faculty, and mothers, they also acknowledge the challenges these two roles inevitably produce. The purpose of this book is to dispute the commonly held belief that motherhood and academia are mutually exclusive and incompatible roles.

The findings contained within this book are derived from a longitudinal study of 120 women faculty members with children. The study began in 1998 and continued until 2008. Starting in 1998, the women were in their early careers and had young children, less than five years of age. Follow-up interviews were conducted in 2008 with the same women, only now in their mid-careers. The women in this study were from a variety of disciplines, which adds to the depth of the research collected.

Beginning with a personal narrative from each of the authors, this book demonstrates a reflexive component, representative of feminist research. Providing insight and context for their research, the authors provide a brief narrative describing their academic journey as mothers, pre-tenure faculty, and successfully tenured faculty. Their stories provide an optimistic outlook, as well as validation for aspiring academics and graduate students alike. The addition of graduate student perspectives on balancing the work and family interface provide a unique integration of voices that are typically unheard.

Attempting to expand the research on motherhood and academia, the authors included women from a wide range of institutions and faculty types on the premise that their experiences will vary according to their work context. In addition to exploring the similarities and differences between institution type and discipline, the authors explore the perspectives of women from dual-career households and those that withdrew themselves from the tenure track. Specially, the authors add the topic of marital status and social class and reveal many pros and cons these two characteristics had over the course of the women’s academic journeys.

Drawing heavily upon liberal and post-structural feminism to demonstrate that the choices many women made, this term was found to permeate their findings, the authors suggest that choice is relational to social capital (150). The authors do add however, that this “choice” is limited within the constraints of gendered norms and expectations. These beliefs also had implications on the choices that the women made during their academic journey.

The final chapters highlight the vagueness of policy at all institutional types in the study. Regardless of institutional type, the authors discuss the ambiguity and general lack of awareness surrounding policies in regard to sick or disability leave, modified duty, tenure stop-clock, long term parental needs, and maternity leave. Incorporating a discussion of the United States’ Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the authors discuss how personal agency, fear and bias avoidance, faculty or department, influence the enactment and effectiveness of these policies.

Concluding the book is a chapter devoted to next steps and advice for all stakeholders in higher education. Drawing upon conclusions from their longitudinal study, the authors provide recommendations and parting thoughts regarding family and career. Returning to the intent of the project, the authors remind the reader that career and family paths can merge to create a meaningful and gratifying journey for academic mothers. Providing examples of effective strategies that are being successfully enacted at various campuses, this book is a strong resource for campuses alike.

As a current graduate student and mother of a young child, I found this book to be highly informative and timely. The integration of graduate student mothers’ experiences and advice for this group was uplifting and inspirational. Far too often, the literature is exceedingly focused on the detriments of simultaneously pursuing motherhood and academia. This book provides hope to women academics beginning their journey with both career and family. The personal narratives add a unique personalization to each chapter and set the context of the discussions that follow. Offering suggestions to improve family friendly policies on campus, this book is also a supportive resource for academic administrators and faculty. In addition, this book will provide the guidance necessary to further pursue research in the area of motherhood and academia, as well as a personal resource of encouragement and inspiration.

References

Statistics Canada. *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-503-X. Ottawa. Version updated December 2011. Ottawa./pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11542-eng.pdf, March 10, 2015.