

Facing New Realities: The Work-Life Nexus

One of the issues I have been most concerned about in recent years is the increasing mismatch between the workplace and the realities of personal, family and home life. As is argued in books like the *Changing rhythms of American family life* (2006) by Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, *Workplace flexibility: Realigning 20th-century jobs for a 21st-century workforce* (2010) by Christensen and Schneider, and *The career mystique: Cracks in the American dream* (2005) by Moen and Roehling, the demographics of the workforce have changed far faster over the past generation than have workplace policies and cultures. Dual-income families, single-parent families, single-income individuals living alone or with partners, unmarried couples with children, blended families, and other personal and family arrangements have become common, perhaps even the norm. At the same time, the workplace tends still to be geared toward the traditional nuclear family in which personal and family responsibilities can be shared by partners, whether to care of each other, their children, or for aging or ill family members. Although I focus here on how some of these changes are affecting higher education, there are similarities between how these issues are playing out in both the academic and non-academic worlds, even as policies and place/time work options may differ between them.

One of the more contentious issues to arise from these changing family and career trajectories is that of spousal and partner hires. Dual career families, both inside and outside academe, are much more common now than they once were. Yet academic hiring is still aimed almost exclusively toward individuals, for a variety of good reasons. Employment laws in the U.S. are, for example, designed so that candidates for positions are evaluated on their professional merits, irrespective of personal situations. Only after a person has been offered a job can personal and family needs be addressed. Although the reasons for these policies are very clear as a means of overcoming discrimination, nepotism and favoritism, they must of necessity ignore changing workforce realities concerning the increase in dual-career families particularly in the current era of

seriously diminishing financial resources to support appointments.

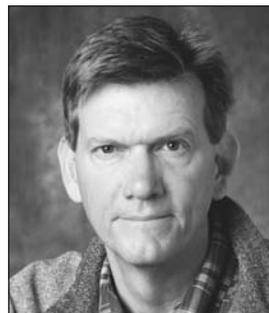
The result, I think, is discord on both sides of the issue. For dual-career families there can be resentment that their needs are only considered as an afterthought to hiring or that the conditions of appointment give them "second class" status in a temporary position that lacks opportunities for professional development and promotion. For their new colleagues, resentment may result from perceptions that such dual-career families are receiving special treatment and that conflicts will ensue over teaching and supervisory responsibilities. The fact that such conflicts arise is a measure of how little these matters are discussed systematically. In the absence of debate and consensus, every department and university has to develop *ad hoc* policies which, in some cases, only accentuate misperceptions that the issues are not being considered openly and fairly. I don't have a ready solution apart from suggesting that there be wider discussion and debate, for example within our discipline. Avoiding the topic simply adds to the sense that we, as a discipline, don't take it seriously.

Another issue has to do with issues of maternity/paternity/parental/family leave. Although these are more readily available than in the past, they haven't really caught up with the realities of twenty-first century family life. One of the problems—at least in the U.S.—are elective family policies that seem fair but really aren't. That is, federal law requires that parental leave be offered, but it is unpaid and parents are not required to take leave. In some countries, of course, parental leave is mandatory. This may seem arbitrary, or even high-handed, if parents want to return to work sooner. But, the pitfall of making leave a voluntary choice is that it turns family issues into a loyalty test: does your family mean more to you than your job? During the early-career period when many people are trying to establish themselves and start family, there can be a sense that people

taking leaves will be perceived to be less serious about their jobs and careers. Most universities allow people to negotiate leaves and to stop the "tenure clock" for a short periods, the notion of the seven-year "tenure clock" set two generations ago hasn't been reset despite tremendous demographic change. A consequence of these voluntary policies is to sustain the status quo, especially with respect to the gender division of labor in higher education with more women in contingent positions and more men in tenure-track and senior positions.

This mismatch between the workplace and the realities of personal, family and home life are just as real for students—they have changed faster than programs have responded. I don't think the buzz-words "non-traditional" or "adult learner" even begin to express the varied personal and family lives of today's undergraduate and graduate students. Yet, for the most part, these students are still assumed to be able to complete a "traditional" BA/BS degree in four years and graduate degrees equally promptly.

Part of the problem is that, as the books above argue and as many people suspect, work is consuming more and more time for many workers, particularly in the U.S. where the average number of hours and days worked has increased in recent decades. Research seems to show that people spend just as much time with their families—and that gender divisions of labor continue at home although they may be less pronounced than they once were—but that people take the extra work hours out of the time they would have used for rest, recuperation, or community engagement. Higher education may offer more flexibility in balancing work and personal life than many other careers, but that doesn't mean the situation can't or shouldn't be improved in order attract the talented and dedicated faculty on which our discipline's future will depend. ■



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