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Kristen W. Springer, Brenda K. Parker and Catherine Leviten-Reid
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Making Space for Graduate Student Parents

Practice and Politics

Kristen W. Springer

Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ

Brenda K. Parker

University of Illinois at Chicago

Catherine Leviten-Reid

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Work–family issues of graduate students are nearly invisible, despite record numbers of men and women in graduate school during their peak childbearing years. Furthermore, very little is known about what, if any, services are available for graduate student parents. In this article we describe the theoretical and practical tensions between society’s view of idealized mothering and academia’s vision of graduate students as idealized workers. We then present results of a survey about parental supports for graduate students administered to graduate directors of sociology PhD programs. The results demonstrate that few official policies exist, most situations are accommodated individually, and graduate directors are often unaware of university services for graduate student parents. The article concludes with a detailed presentation of potential departmental and university initiatives designed to support graduate student parents. These initiatives can be readily incorporated by graduate departments and universities to help curb the leaking pipeline of women in academia.

Keywords: *graduate student parents; family-friendly; women in academia; parental support policies; university policies*

There are salient similarities between the cultures of mothering and academia. They both, for example, place harsh demands on one’s body and mind. If one were offered a purview into homes across the country in the wee hours of the night, one might find both academics and parents pacing the floors, searching and pleading for that elusive cocktail of soothing strategies to lull a crying baby to sleep or the rhetorical flourishes needed to complete that vexing chapter. The intensity and reverence with which

academics and parents undertake their respective “labors of love” is undoubtedly similar. And certainly both vocations can be marked by constant self-scrutiny and a nagging sense of incompleteness and imperfection.

Yet in spite of these ironic similarities, being both an academic and parent is quite incompatible in practice. Women, in particular, who find themselves precariously trying to balance these two roles often struggle and sometimes fail. The sheer time demands coupled with the unrealistic yet normative conceptions of “idealized” mothers and “100%” academics mean that one can never truly be both. These tensions and contradictions can be particularly explicit during graduate school, when aspiring academics are being “socialized” into their new vocations, and when many women are experiencing motherhood for the first time.

Furthermore, whereas there is substantive literature aimed at understanding and addressing the needs of faculty parents (Armenti, 2004; Bassett, 2005; Bhattacharjee, 2004; Colbeck & Drago, 2005; Mason & Goulden, 2002, 2004), there is much less available for graduate student parents. Certainly many of the issues faced by faculty and student parents are similar, such as work–life balance struggles and the need for adequate parental leave. However, there are circumstances often specific to graduate student parents or exacerbated for graduate student parents—including but not limited to relationships with advisors, financial insecurity, career uncertainty, and open or flexible timelines. Furthermore, most institutional and national efforts devoted to retaining and recruiting parents in higher education tend to focus on faculty rather than graduate students. As Kennelly and Spalter-Roth (2006) argue, “these policies are primarily designed to aid scholars who have already attained academic jobs, while there is even less systemic help in place for graduate students” (p. 31).

In this article, we attempt to make the needs and experiences of graduate student parents more visible. We describe a growing population of

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graduate student parents and discuss the theoretical and practical tensions between society's view of idealized mothering and academia's vision of an idealized graduate student. We then present results of a survey on existing campus-wide and departmental supports for graduate student parents that were distributed to the top PhD granting sociology departments in the United States. Finally, we conclude by offering suggestions on how it might be possible to square the circle of incompatibility between graduate school and parenting. In particular, we discuss an array of existing and recommended formal initiatives to support graduate student parents.¹ In doing so, we hope to contribute to a more sustained dialogue within and beyond sociology about improving and expanding pathways for graduate student parents—a discussion that goes beyond simplified conceptions of and synthetic narratives about “opting in” or “opting out.”

A Growing Dilemma: Graduate Studies and Childrearing

In recent years, women have been entering and completing graduate school in record numbers.² Because the median age for women at doctoral degree completion is 33.6 years, the likelihood that women's time in graduate school will coincide with their childbearing years is quite high (Hoffer et al., 2006).³ In fact, 24% of women and 28% of men enrolled in doctoral programs have dependent children, and 42% of women enrolled in masters degree programs or first professional degrees have children (Mason, 2006). In addition, many women (including sociologists) who want children forgo having them in graduate school because of fears about insufficient maternity leave, delayed progress in graduate school, and the perceived incompatibility of academia and caregiving (Mason, 2006; Spalter-Roth & Kennelly, 2004).⁴

Having a child or raising a family while trying to complete coursework, exams, and a dissertation introduces new barriers to an already difficult and often overwhelming process (Detore-Nakamura, 2003; Gerber, 2005; Jirón-King, 2005; O'Reilly, 2002). One study found that graduate student mothers spend 102 hours per week on their paid and unpaid duties compared with 95 hours for graduate student fathers and approximately 75 hours for childless graduate students (Mason, 2006). Furthermore, a study by the American Sociological Association found that many crucial resources—including help with publishing, mentoring, effective teaching training, and fellowships—were less available to graduate student parents, particularly mothers, than to other students (Spalter-Roth & Kennelly, 2004). Researchers have also

found that graduate students with children are less likely to be enrolled in the highest ranking departments and hypothesize that this trend is due to the heavy demands placed on students within these institutions as well as the shortage of female faculty, and hence the lack of role models, in these departments (Kennelly & Spalter-Roth, 2006).

Given these data, it is not surprising that there are differences in degree achievement and career paths between graduate students who have children and those who do not. Men and women with children are a smaller percentage of doctoral recipients than those without children (Lovik, 2004). Although no data are available on attrition rates among graduate school mothers, a review of the literature leads us to believe that this is an important “pipeline leak” for women. In terms of future careers, graduate students with children are much less likely to enter research universities than those without children (Long, 2001; Williams, 2004) and to cite work–life balance as a reason for shifting away from “professor with research emphasis” careers (Mason, 2006). Within academic sociology, gender and parental status differences are evident. Longitudinal research on the 1996–1997 cohort of sociology PhDs demonstrates that even 4 years after graduation, men and women who had children in graduate school were less likely to be in a tenure track position—with women particularly disadvantaged. Specifically, 36% of men who received a PhD in sociology in 1996–1997 and did not have children while in graduate school were in a tenure track position by 2001. This is in contrast to 33% of women who did not have children while in graduate school, 25% of men who did have children while in graduate school, and 24% of women who had children while in graduate school (Spalter-Roth & Kennelly, 2004).

Graduate student mothers are not only confronted with logistical difficulties, limited support, and eventually constrained career paths; they must also contend with conflicting and powerful ideologies that surround academia and motherhood.

In a Perfect World: Idealized Academics and Self-Sacrificing Mothers

Mythology, expectations, and ideals surrounding the culture of academia abound. Academics are trained to be monkish in their devotion and slavish in their pursuit of knowledge. They are not to be fettered by “worldly annoyances” (Eliot, 1994) that might distract from their pure and single-minded pursuits. Time demands are high, and pressure to publish is constantly

increasing. Graduate students are hardly immune to these pressures. In fact, they are often simultaneously teaching, conducting independent research, writing, working with faculty, and participating in a number of “informal” obligations, such as networking, attending departmental colloquia, and supporting their advisor’s research activities.

At the same time, cultural ideologies and normative expectations surrounding motherhood are even more pervasive and pernicious. If academics are supposed to work around the clock, mothers are supposed to do so with perpetual smiles on their faces and in a stylish pair of shoes. In addition, a mother’s slavishness is supposed to be selfless; her devotion undiminished by lack of financial reward or professional prestige. The pressure to achieve perfect motherhood—referred to as “the new momism” and “intensive mothering” (Crittenden, 2002; Douglas & Michaels, 2004)—is augmented and accompanied by the ongoing media celebration of mothers who are “opting out” (Belkin, 2003). Here, affluent and successful women who have made it to the top and who supposedly have access to the vast array of choices available to modern women are now *choosing* to stay home with the children. Of course, the media idealization of “opting out” ignores the myriad social and institutional constraints that *push* mothers out of the labor market, namely workplace inflexibility, inadequate family supports, and discrimination against mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006).

The discourse of “choice” implicit in this “opting out” rhetoric also plagues graduate student parents—mothers in particular. Indeed, many graduate student mothers “choose” to take time off from school to parent or “choose” to leave graduate school altogether. Also, many women “choose” to apply to non-tenure track positions in lieu of other faculty positions. However, choice and discrimination are not mutually exclusive; many women who are “pushed out” of the labor market describe the situation as a “choice” (Williams, 2000; Williams et al., 2006). The “opt out” myth is further complicated for graduate student mothers by the invisible and devalued nature of social reproduction within academic institutions. Mothering and fathering is not normative on campus. Student mothers experience awkward pauses rendered by pregnant bodies on campus, struggle to navigate strollers in classrooms, and search to find clean and discreet places to feed their babies. Although sometimes subtle, there are constant reminders in the social and physical environment of the university that graduate student parents and their children do not truly belong.

This culture of idealized parenthood, although increasingly affecting men, remains largely about mothers and their cultural identities as women

and caregivers. Women with children, including graduate students and academics, spend much more time on tasks related to caregiving and the household than men with children (Crittenden, 2002; Hays, 1996; Mason, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). Furthermore, it is mothers who are the objects of discourses about “opting out” and whose decisions are regularly glorified and demonized (Williams et al., 2006).

When placed side-by-side, the archetypes of ideal graduate students and ideal mothers are clearly incompatible. For graduate student mothers situated amidst these impossible ideologies and institutions, the challenges are vast. It is to these challenges—and possible solutions—that we now turn.

Patchwork Supports

In the book *Women on the Fast Track*, Mason and Ekman (2007) report that “Women in PhD programs . . . perceive a ‘no children allowed’ rule in the prevailing climate” (p. 15). We understand why this perception stands. Although limited, extant research suggests that insufficient institutional supports exist for graduate student parents. In a study of doctoral students within the University of California system, 58% of women reported that they were dissatisfied with department support for career–life balance (Mason, 2006). Likewise, Spalter-Roth and Kennelly (2004; Kennelly & Spalter-Roth, 2006) argue that there is little “systemic help” for graduate student parents, and that institutional resources are biased toward nonparents. Our own survey of sociology departments supports this contention.

In the spring of 2007, we conducted an online survey of Graduate Program Directors for the top 63 U.S. sociology departments, as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* (2007); our response rate was 63%. The goal of the survey was to find out what supports were available to graduate student parents, both at the departmental and institutional (campus-wide) level. Because departments are where students’ graduate experiences are most intensely embedded, it is important to assess resources that might be specific to departments as well as available campus-wide. We selected sociology departments to survey because they have high proportions of female graduate students and female faculty; a potentially high proportion of mothers; and disciplinary awareness about gender, families, and associated societal issues. We thought these departments might be exemplars of informal or formal parental support policies. Graduate Program Directors were selected as contacts because of their ongoing interaction with graduate students and presumed familiarity with related departmental and university policies.⁵

We found three underlying patterns in the data: There are few formal institutional supports tailored to the needs of graduate student parents; there is limited knowledge on the part of faculty regarding supports that may exist for graduate students with children; and departments accommodate graduate student parents on a flexible, case-by-case basis. All three serve to create a message that children are not a standard feature in the lives of doctoral candidates. As Table 1 indicates, departments provide limited resources and programming tailored to the needs of these graduate students. Fewer than 15% of departments offer any of the following: family-friendly space, dissertator support groups, childcare subsidies, or faculty training on the issues faced by graduate student parents. Only slightly more (17.5%) provide professional development opportunities tailored to graduate student parents, such as a session on going on the job market while pregnant or with an infant. Holding family-friendly social functions was the anomalous item, with more than three quarters of respondents stating that their departments held such events.

A slightly different picture emerges with supports present campus-wide. Childcare subsidies and family-friendly space become more prevalent, with 25% to 30% of institutions reporting that these are available to students. This signals that although sociology departments may not, for example, have their own space available to create a lactation room or financial resources to help contribute to their students' childcare fees, these supports may still be part of the campus infrastructure. Similarly, sociology departments may defer the organization of peer support groups to the Graduate School or a campus body that provides health and wellness or writing services for students.

If it is indeed the case that some supports fall under the purview of campuses and not departments, what becomes problematic is not only the large number of institutions not offering these resources, but also respondents' lack of knowledge about what supports were available at the campus level. Almost 33% report not knowing about childcare subsidies, and 40% state they do not know whether lactation rooms or other child-friendly spaces are available on campus. Furthermore, at least 45% of respondents do not know about dissertator support groups or professional development opportunities for graduate student parents. These figures may be even higher if some of the missing responses are due to lack of knowledge about the campus supports available. This means that students may have difficulty accessing information about policies, take-up rates might be unnecessarily low, and—in a worst-case scenario—students may actually leave their program perceiving no way to accommodate their parental and student status. Moreover, the fact that

Table 1
Supports for Graduate Student Parents

Offered at the Departmental Level	Yes (%)	No (%)	Do Not Know (%)	No Answer (%)
Training for faculty on how to support graduate student parents	0.0	92.5	0.0	7.5
Professional development opportunities tailored to the circumstances of graduate student parents	17.5	62.5	2.5	17.5
Dissertator support groups specifically for graduate student parents	2.5	80.0	7.5	10.0
Social activities where graduate students' children are encouraged to attend	75.0	17.5	5.0	2.5
Family-friendly space (such as lactation rooms)	10.0	67.5	5.0	17.5
Subsidies for childcare	5.0	80.0	0.0	15.0
<hr/>				
Offered at the Institutional Level				
Training for faculty on how to support graduate student parents	0.0	47.5	35.0	17.5
Professional development opportunities tailored to the circumstances of graduate student parents	5.0	35.0	45.0	15.0
Dissertator support groups specifically for graduate student parents	7.5	20.0	47.5	25.0
Social activities where graduate students' children are encouraged to attend	35.0	7.5	32.5	25.0
Family-friendly space (such as lactation rooms)	30.0	15.0	40.0	15.0
Subsidies for childcare	25.0	25.0	32.5	17.5

Source: Survey conducted by authors of top 63 sociology departments in the United States ($N = 40$).

many supports are “unknown” suggests that institutions, departments, and faculty do not have the level of recognition necessary to help address the growing population of graduate student parents.

It is less clear whether and what kinds of maternity, paternity, or parental leave policies are available to graduate student parents. In a recent review of the resources available to graduate student parents attending institutions

belonging to the American Association of Universities⁶ (AAU), it was found that 26% of these institutions provided a maternity or parental leave policy, whereas only 10% of members had paid maternity leave policies (Mason, 2006). A survey conducted by the American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics (n.d.), to gauge the presence of "female-friendly climates" for graduate students in physics, found that 37% of respondents (49/133) reported having a family leave policy in place.⁷ On closer examination of the data, however, it became clear to us that several representatives from physics departments answered "Yes" when what was in fact available to students was the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and little or nothing more. For example, one respondent wrote that

For the typical student on a half-time appointment, up to 5 days (20 hours) of sick leave may be used per year for attention to the medical needs of immediate family members. All employees are covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Another, also responding positively to the availability of parental leave, wrote that they provided "Nothing beyond what is required by the Family Medical Leave Act"; whereas a third respondent wrote that "Graduate students are covered by the Family Medical Leave Act. Up to 12 weeks of unpaid medical leave is guaranteed to all graduate students with at least 1,250 hours of work in the previous year." This last quotation is, in fact, incongruous, and points to the limitations of the FMLA as a meaningful support for graduate student parents because few are likely to officially work the 24 hours per week necessary to meet the eligibility requirements. We also found this lack of clarity surrounding leave policies in our own survey. Although we found that 40% of respondents stated that a maternity leave policy was available either at the department or university level, we do not know whether this includes paid or unpaid leaves, or whether respondents were referring specifically to the FMLA.

The last pattern that emerged from our own survey data concerns the flexible approach used by sociology departments to support graduate student parents. More than two thirds of responding sociology departments indicated that they had research and teaching assistant positions with flexible deliverables and hours, which could conceivably be held by graduate student parents. An open-ended question at the end of the survey resulted in comments such as the following: "The Sociology Department makes an effort to accommodate graduate student parents on a case-by-case basis and

prides itself on being as flexible and supportive as possible” and “Our department policies are very flexible and we try to accommodate all special issues graduate students have, including parenthood.”

Flexibility is paradoxical. On one hand, departmental flexibility in time lines and assistantships is critical and can make the difference in a graduate student parent’s desire and ability to complete her program. Flexibility can create the space for graduate student parents to focus part of their time on their studies and part of the time on their children, and to tailor their graduate experience to their needs and temporal circumstances. This can be especially important when childcare spaces are hard to find. However, flexibility should be supported by official policies and practices. Without these formal structures, the distribution of flexibility options will likely be inconsistent across students and departments, will be subject to the discretion of individual actors, and is implicitly framed as “asking for a favor” rather than using a policy or resource. This can leave a graduate parent in a precarious or vulnerable position. For example, one of our graduate student colleagues who had negotiated a paid maternity leave of 6 weeks was later asked by her supervisor to make up those hours. Without a formal policy, the student did not feel that she had the capacity to challenge this “change of terms.” Thus, flexibility is a necessary but insufficient strategy to support graduate student parents.

University and Department Initiatives to Support Graduate Student Parents

Although our study found that *in general* there were insufficient supports in place for graduate student parents, we found exceptions, signs of progress, and reasons to be optimistic about future change. First, we know that universities can and do implement policies and programs to accommodate specific subgroups of students. Examples include creating resource centers for people with disabilities, as well as providing these students with auxiliary aids, such as wheelchair accessible classrooms, and adjustments to academic requirements (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Student athletes comprise a second subgroup acknowledged by campus communities: They are offered supports ranging from academic assistance (which can include tutoring and liaison services between the athletes, coaches, and faculty) to counseling services (Gabbard & Halischak, 1993; Jordan & Denson, 1990). We are not stating that the needs of graduate student parents are similar to students who have a disability or who participate in athletic activities, or

that the structures currently in place to assist these other two subgroups are fully adequate or standard across universities. Our point is simply that there is a historic (and often positive) precedent for tailoring academic environments to different kinds of students.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that there is an association between graduate school success and implementation of supportive policies and programs. For example, past research has demonstrated that attrition is linked to poor integration into graduate programs, which is partly created by inadequate information available to students, informal norms rather than formal policies, and a weak sense of community in departments (Bair & Hawarth, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). Furthermore, evaluation of an intervention designed to reduce general graduate student attrition and accelerate time to PhD completion (the Graduate Education Initiative) identified a number of program-level stumbling blocks that impede success (Ehrenberg, Jakobson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007). These stumbling blocks include lack of clarity regarding faculty expectations, inadequate financial resources for students, departmental culture, and infrequent feedback and support from advisors (Ehrenberg et al., 2007). These were some of the same resources that Kennelly and Spalter-Roth (2006) found most lacking for graduate student mothers. Unfortunately, however, Kennelly and Spalter-Roth did not have attrition or success data. This literature on the general graduate population suggests that departmental and institutional initiatives could help graduate student mothers deal with the incompatibility of idealized mothers and idealized academic expectations.

One possible reason that departments and universities have few institutional supports for graduate student parents can be partly explained by the concept of “structural lags.” Specifically, it is likely that policies and programs have not yet caught up with the needs and realities of graduate student parenting duties—perhaps due to the relatively recent influx of women doctoral students. In an effort to help bridge the gap between identifying needs and developing policies, we now turn to possible support strategies for graduate student parents. Specifically, based on existing model policies, academic research, and the experiences of graduate student mothers, we have composed a summary of possible support strategies aimed at departmental and university administrators. These strategies are not mutually exclusive—on the contrary, the strongest support systems provide multiple types of initiatives and combine institutional and departmental mechanisms for supporting these students.

Family-Friendly University Strategies

There are multiple concrete ways that universities can, and do, support graduate student parents, including paid parental leave, extending academic deadlines, and providing subsidized childcare and dependent health insurance. Efforts to create a family-friendly university culture are also crucial.

Paid Parental Leave

To facilitate a healthy recovery from childbirth and support the transition into joint parenthood–student status, we suggest that universities provide paid parental leave for birth and/or adoption. Although, ideally, all students would be given this option, most existing policies provide funding only for graduate students who are already receiving some form of paid support. The average range of paid leave is 2 to 12 weeks and some paid leave policies are available to mothers and fathers.

In cases where paid parental leave is not possible, unpaid parental leave should be offered while allowing the student to maintain “enrolled” status. Remaining registered as full-time students facilitates retention of library privileges, graduate student housing, health insurance, and informal ties with faculty and other students. With international students, official university affiliation can be the difference between staying in the United States and returning to their home country.

To help address these issues with enrollment, some universities have explicitly classified time for caregiving as an “academic accommodation period” rather than a leave of absence. During an academic accommodation period, students maintain full-time enrollment status but are allowed to extend deadlines. The accommodation period varies by university, but typically ranges between 1 semester and 1 year.

It is important to point out that most graduate students are not covered by the FMLA. The FMLA requires organizations with more than 50 employees to provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave for certain family and medical reasons each 12-month period. However, to be eligible, employees must have worked at least 1,250 hours in the past year—an average of 24 hours of work for each of 52 weeks. The vast majority of graduate or teaching assistantships legally work for 20 hours/week or less, making the majority of graduate students ineligible for FMLA. The fact that most graduate students do not have this legal recourse for unpaid parental leave underscores the importance of university-based leave programs for graduate student parents.

Extension of Deadlines and Part-Time Options

Paid parental leave is an important strategy to assist new parents during the initial transition to parenthood. However, as any parent knows, life does not go back to “pre-baby normal” after the initial 2 to 12 weeks. To help graduate student parents obtain their PhD, some universities give automatic extensions of deadlines when graduate students adopt or give birth. This automatic semester or year extension on academic deadlines covers requirements such as preliminary exams and time to completion of degrees. These extension policies have been accompanied by an additional term of financial support at some universities.

Although not a policy specific to parents, university support of part-time graduate training could also be an important alternative for some graduate student parents who are unable, or unwilling, to return full-time. This alternative is akin to arguments for half-time tenure track options and job sharing to retain tenure track parents (Drago & Williams, 2000). Part-time students would be expected to complete their classes and other PhD requirements less quickly than full-time students. As students become dissertators, the funding solution could be as simple as providing a stipend commensurate with their level of work (i.e., half stipend for half commitment). However, the situation is more complicated when students are taking classes and their funding therefore also includes a substantial amount to cover tuition remission.

Childcare Support

Quality childcare is expensive and graduate students almost never earn large salaries. However, it is next to impossible to make any progress on degree completion without child-free time to work. There are many institutional supports to help provide quality childcare for graduate student parents. Universities can, and some do, provide need-based financial support for childcare services. These subsidies generally do not cover expenses for full-time quality day care, but can cover part-time care or offset the costs of full-time care. Some universities will provide funding only for institutional care, which makes it particularly difficult for parents who would prefer at-home care or who can not secure an opening in a childcare center. One possible avenue for future support of campus childcare services is through federal funding. For example, the U.S. Department of Education already provides Childcare Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grants to universities in order to support low-income parents. Eligibility for CCAMPIS funds is determined by eligibility for Federal Pell Grants (2008), which are

exclusively for undergraduate students, with the small exception for postbaccalaureate students in a teacher certification or licensure program that does not lead to a graduate degree. Although CCAMPIS funds are not available for any graduate degree seeking student, the already established infrastructure could provide a relatively easy foray for the U.S. Department of Education to provide childcare subsidies for graduate students.

In addition to providing financial support for routine childcare, some universities offer subsidies for secondary care (back-up childcare, sick childcare, and evening childcare) to enable graduate student parents to meet their academic commitments when routine childcare is not available. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that graduate student parents miss important networking and professional development opportunities when they forgo conference participation, in part due to childcare constraints. Some universities offer funds to pay for on-site or at-home childcare while graduate student parents participate in academic conferences. Even in the absence of university funding, departments can (and at least one already does) provide childcare funding to support conference participation of graduate student parents.

Childcare services and support extend beyond subsidies and remuneration. One campus women's center, for example, runs a volunteer childcare program where student volunteers are matched with student parents for 3 free hours of childcare each week. The student volunteers are screened by the university. This same women's center also provides a monthly "kids night out" where volunteers provide free babysitting for student parents.

Health Insurance for Dependents

One very important concern for any parent is health care coverage for their children. This concern may be even more pronounced for graduate student parents who earn a limited salary. If student health coverage is not readily extendable to dependents for a nominal fee, students may pursue paid employment outside of school, slowing down if not completely derailing degree completion. It is therefore essential that the dependent health insurance be affordable on a graduate student budget.

Enhancing Family-Friendly University Culture

The family-friendly culture of universities is crucial for supporting graduate student parents.⁸ Certainly, policies such as those already described strongly signal that universities value graduate student parents. However, without a family-friendly culture, graduate student parents may not feel

comfortable taking advantage of these policies—a problem well documented with faculty family support policies. Furthermore, family support services can alleviate the isolation often experienced by graduate student parents and help keep these parents connected to university life.

Some examples of support services that have been established and are useful include support groups, listservs or Web-spaces for graduate student parents, and parent resource centers. University health services will often offer dissertation support groups and group counseling sessions tailored for specific needs. Although some of these groups could be useful for graduate student parents, the needs of graduate student parents are specific enough to warrant offering a tailored group. For maximum success, universities could provide childcare during these meetings. Several universities have also established bulletin boards or listservs for graduate student parents. These informal networks are easy to set up and provide invaluable access to other parents across campus. Finally, parent resource centers—or even just one parent resource specialist—can provide valuable information on available policies, childcare opportunities, and links to the community.

A less obvious—but crucial—signifier of a family-friendly culture is the availability of lactation rooms and changing tables. Changing tables are becoming ubiquitous in public restrooms. However, university bathrooms frequently lack any suitable changing space—especially bathrooms in departments and places infrequently visited by nonemployees. The message in this absence is clear—small children are not expected or welcome. The addition of changing tables is a relatively inexpensive, yet powerful, way to show support for all parents on campus.

Lactation rooms are also hard to find on university campuses and pose a particular problem for graduate student parents who usually share office space. For parents who would like to return to work and continue breastfeeding, it is essential to have a secure, discreet, comfortable place to nurse or pump breast milk. By not offering suitable space for pumping, universities and departments give the message that mothers must choose between work and parenting. Importantly, lactation rooms are relatively inexpensive and can be made out of any small office space. Although there are ideal components of lactation rooms (i.e., soft light, comfortable chair, relaxing music), the reality is that any room with a power outlet, table, chair, and door lock will work fine. University-level initiatives could increase access to lactation rooms and changing tables campus-wide. However, departments could make these modest modifications with departmental resources even in the absence of university policies. It is important to recognize that space is almost always at a premium in universities and creating a lactation

space for one, or a few, mothers might compete with other departmental space needs. In the event that lactation space is not available for each department, the chairs of departments within close geographic proximity could discuss the possibility of creating a shared lactation room.

Obviously, these family-friendly strategies are not useful if parents are unaware of them or cannot locate them. This is an obvious point, but one anecdote highlights the importance of making this family-friendly information readily available. As an exercise, one of the authors called her university's women's center to find out the location of lactation rooms and/or changing tables. The women's center directed her to call the university general information line, who transferred her to university facilities, who then transferred her to operation services where she left a message that has yet to be returned. At this same university, a reference librarian laughed outright at a graduate student mother who asked about a discreet place to express breast milk.⁹

Clearly, it is essential to disseminate information about family-friendly services, including the location of changing tables and lactation room—preferably in a central location such as a parent resource center or Web site known by all relevant university facilities. Some universities provide a list of lactation rooms and changing tables on Web sites. One university provides a “parent-friendly” campus map where a regular campus map is enhanced to include locations of changing tables, lactation rooms, child play areas, and food services with high chairs.

Family-Friendly Departmental Strategies

Although university family-friendly culture is important, the norms and culture of individual departments may be at least as consequential for the success or failure of their graduate students. As such, it is crucial to understand how departments can create a culture of support and encouragement for graduate student parents. Indeed, some of the strategies discussed already can be implemented at the departmental level, if not available through the university. For example, departments can provide modest funding for childcare during conference participation, create lactation rooms and changing table space, develop departmental parent dissertation support groups, and extend departmental deadlines. Furthermore, there are some specific strategies best suited for implementation by departments, rather than by universities.

Mentoring

Mentoring and faculty support are crucial for any graduate student's success, but are disproportionately lacking for mothers. Enhancing mentoring for graduate student parents is an important task for departments. Specific strategies to improve mentoring include department chair training, faculty training, family–life discussion in standard first-year proseminars, and job market workshops for parents.

Department Chair and Faculty Training

Department chairs and graduate program directors can have a huge impact on understanding, supporting, advertising, and implementing family-friendly policies. Furthermore, department chairs can be instrumental in fostering and promoting a departmental culture supportive of combining paid work and parenting. Recognizing the importance of department chairs in creating a family-friendly atmosphere, the University of California Faculty Family Friendly Edge initiative developed a “toolkit” for chairs and deans at University of California schools (Krasch et al., 2007). The toolkit presents data on how family formation affects academic careers, articulates the importance of creating family-friendly departments, offers advice for chairs and deans, reviews relevant policies and laws, and presents several best practice scenarios based on plausible cases. Although this toolkit is designed to support faculty parents, the general ideas and issues are relevant for graduate student parents. However, it would be even more helpful if each university created a similar “toolkit” for departmental chairs focused on supporting graduate student parents, complete with specific examples based on university policies.

Faculty training could be similar to department chair training; however, greater attention might be directed specifically at how to mentor graduate student parents. This training could adequately be covered during one faculty meeting. Faculty could discuss the research showing differential mentoring dependent on parenthood status. In addition, faculty and staff could be told about departmental and university policies for graduate student parents. Furthermore, faculty might not know that students supported with federal funding may be able to receive paid leave for parenting, even if their university does not have a specific parental leave policy. This short training could be very important given that many of the responding department graduate directors reported not knowing about university policies. In addition, not one of the departments reported training for faculty members to enhance support for graduate student parents. Faculty meetings would also be an obvious time to emphasize a zero tolerance policy for discrimination based on parental status.

We recognize that there may be limited institutional resources available for training chairs, graduate program directors, and faculty. However, it may be possible to adapt existing materials (such as the University of California family-friendly toolkits) and/or combine training on family issues with other planned departmental or university trainings. Furthermore, disciplinary organizations, such as the American Sociological Association (ASA), can help deliver and coordinate trainings. For example, ASA's 2008 Directors of Graduate Study conference explicitly addressed graduate student parent issues including family-friendly policies and departmental support strategies. Other types of low-cost awareness-building activities, such as department brown-bag discussions, could be used in the absence of resources for formal training. Training of chairs, graduate program directors, and faculty can yield important rewards such as improved climate and enhanced retention and satisfaction of highly qualified graduate students.

Graduate Student Training

Many graduate programs provide an orientation to incoming students, often in the form of a weekly proseminar. These proseminars generally involve faculty members discussing their research in an effort to inform new graduate students. This proseminar would be an ideal forum to include several sessions on balancing work and life. These sessions could include discussions about parenting as a graduate student, but could also focus on the general struggle with being a productive academic and a well-rounded person. Incorporating work–life sessions in this proseminar series could help alleviate some of the major fears of all new graduate students, as well as give the message that the department values the combination of work with other life activities.

At the opposite end of graduate training, departments could help support graduate student parents by providing training on job market issues specific to families. Some important issues include telling or not telling about children/pregnancy, whether or not to discuss spousal hire issues if relevant, and accounting for gaps in curricula vitae or longer time to PhD completion due to raising children.

Departmental Culture

The essence of creating a family-friendly departmental culture is to support caregiving responsibilities as well as academic endeavors. Ideally, departments would not just tolerate graduate student parenting—but would value graduate students as whole people with a career, a life, a family, and so on.

One simple way to help create family-friendly culture is to have departmental activities where children, partners, and spouses are explicitly included. In one of the author's departments, annual picnics always had activities planned for children of all ages, including bubbles, coloring, and football. The message was clearly that children are welcome. However, not all departments and universities are supportive. For example, an article on graduate student parenting by O'Connor (2004) in *On Campus With Women* included this story:

In some cases, universities barely acknowledge that students have children. "When I started the doctoral program" one doctoral student recalls, "I was informed of a welcoming barbecue at the dean's house, on a Saturday afternoon. I thought, 'How nice!' Then I asked if I could bring my ten-month-old and was told, 'Well, no.' The reasoning I was given was that [the dean] had fragile things in his house." This experience was, says the mother of three, "Not a good way to start the program."

Departments can also create a safe and supportive environment for graduate student parents by encouraging all student parents to avail themselves of family-friendly resources, posting and disseminating university and departmental parental leave policies to student *and* faculty, and enforcing a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination based on parental status (among other statuses).

Evaluation

We also advocate evaluating the effects of these supports and policies, both at the departmental and university levels. The importance of collecting data on attrition and time to completion is becoming increasingly understood by academic administrators, as is assessing initiatives put in place to prevent graduate students from dropping out or to expedite the PhD process. Any data collected with the purpose of tracking student attrition and time to completion should, at the very least, include whether graduate students have children and whether and when they gave birth or adopted a child during graduate school. Programs implemented specifically to retain graduate student parents should also include an evaluative component.

Conclusion

Mounting research demonstrates that having a baby during graduate school in the social sciences harms women's careers. Women in the social sciences who have children during graduate school are less likely to obtain

a tenure-track job immediately after graduate school. When these women do obtain tenure-track positions, they are less likely to receive tenure compared with similar men, or to women without children. Unfortunately, despite increased recognition of the “brain drain” resulting from mothers leaving the academic pipeline, few universities have established comprehensive policies to support graduate student parents. Indeed, the reality is that many universities do not have even the most meager of supports, such as changing tables or lactation rooms.

Graduate student mothers are not the only ones to suffer from inadequate support. Although women with children are the most disadvantaged, graduate student parents of both genders are less likely than nonparents to complete their degrees, to earn tenure, and to eventually work as faculty at top research universities (Kennelly & Spalter-Roth 2006; Lovick, 2004; Spalter-Roth & Kennelly 2004; Williams, 2004). Also, our survey of sociology programs showed an overall lack of institutional supports for both graduate student mothers and fathers. It is important that institutions see the importance of providing adequate mentoring and support for *all parents* as they pursue their graduate studies. As Joan Williams and other feminists have argued, the path to both broader gender equity and reduced family–work conflict will necessarily involve a shift in roles for both men and women, including greater involvement in parenting by men (Williams, 2000). Institutional supports for all graduate student parents have the potential to attract and retain a diverse and intellectually rigorous student body that includes talented mothers and fathers.

Notes

1. We recognize that informal support systems can be important and critical resources for graduate student parents. Informal support networks can provide safe space to share frustrations and possible solutions to balancing the demands of academia and family life. However, because the focus of this article is on formal institutional supports, we do not discuss such informal activities here. Elsewhere, we explore and affirm the importance of informal supports for graduate student parents and also provide a variety of recommendations aimed at individuals struggling to balance graduate school and parenthood. See Leviten-Reid, Parker, and Springer’s (2008), *Learning Through Life: Mothering and Graduate School*.

2. For example, in 2002 women comprised 60% of sociology PhD recipients (Spalter-Roth & Kennelly, 2004).

3. Among faculty that went on to achieve tenure, the average period for graduate school completion was 9.3 years in 1999, compared with 7.6 years in 1985 (Mason, 2006).

4. The choice to delay childbirth has important consequences for women, including declining fertility, constrained reproduction options, and/or ultimately having smaller families than desired (Mason & Ekman, 2007). Data suggest that male graduate students and early-career faculty do not defer childrearing at the same rate as women.

5. We recognize that graduate program directors are an imperfect source of information about the university, but also argue that most graduate students' experiences with the university are centered in and often "filtered" through their departments. In this way, graduate program directors' knowledge about supports at both the departmental and university level offers useful data for this study.

6. This review was done by looking at the Web sites of these institutions and so may not paint a complete picture of the policies and programs available.

7. Respondents were department chairs or designated departmental representatives. Furthermore, we examined the data when 133 responses were available, although at the time of submitting this article there were 142 survey responses.

8. A family-friendly departmental culture is, of course, critically important. In this section we focus on university culture and then move to departmental support in the next section.

9. The student ended up pumping milk over the sinks in the public restroom while other library patrons came and went.

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